

Screen



Surrealism and cinema issue

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Special debate: Cronenberg's *Crash*

Subscription & order information:

Screen (ISSN 0036-9543) is published quarterly in March, June, September, December by Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK. Annual subscription price for institutions of UK and Europe £65, USA and Rest of the World US\$122. Personal subscriptions £36 for UK and Europe and US\$61 USA and Rest of the World, and for Students and Unemployed UK and Europe £25, USA and Rest of the World US\$45. **Screen** is distributed by M.A.I.L. America, 2323 Randolph Avenue, Avenel, New Jersey, N.J. 07001, USA. Periodical postage paid at Newark, New Jersey, USA and additional entry points. US POSTMASTER: send address changes to **Screen**, c/o M.A.I.L. America, 2323 Randolph Avenue, Avenel, New Jersey, N.J. 07001, USA.

Payment is required with all orders and subscriptions are accepted and entered by the volume(s). Payment may be made by the following methods: Cheque (made payable to Oxford University Press), National Girobank (Account 500 1056), Credit Card (Access, Visa, American Express, Diners Club), UNESCO Coupons. Bankers: Barclays Bank plc, PO Box 333, Oxford Code 20-65-18. Account 00715654. Individual rates apply only when copies are sent to a private address and are paid for by personal cheque or credit card.

Please send orders and requests for sample copies to: Journals Subscriptions Department, Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP. Telex 837330 OXPRESG. Fax 01865 267485

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ISSN 0036-9543

Cover illustration

Un Chien andalou (Luis Buñuel, 1929). Picture courtesy: BFI Stills; © Les Grands Films Classiques, Paris.

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Screen Studies Conference

Glasgow • 3-5 July 1998

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The slit eye, the scorpion and the sign of the cross: surrealist film theory and practice revisited

RAMONA FOTIADE

The analysis of the two-fold relationship between cinema and the artistic avant garde of the 1920s and the 1930s has often provided a valuable insight into the evolution of contemporary film theory and practice. The surrealist principle of poetic 'estrangement' (*dépaysement*) – that is, random visual association – inspired the most unexpected *rapprochements* across a wide range of film genres and styles. Robert Desnos, one of the most dedicated surrealist writers for the screen, discerned a common 'revolutionary candour' where others would most probably notice striking differences between the directors' style, editing and subject choice. Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925–6), Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925), Erich von Stroheim's *The Wedding March* (1925) and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* (1929) all belonged, in Desnos's vision, to the same rebellious strand of productions expected to shatter the 'law and order' of bourgeois institutions – from politics to matrimony, from religion to art and morality. Considering this 'random' selection proposed by Desnos's 'Avant-garde cinema'¹ one may argue that the actual common trait of the films with which surrealism associated itself lay in their non-commercial and non-narrative nature. But stating that would be to ignore the enthusiastic acclaim with which the promoters of the movement (Philippe Soupault, André Breton) received Feuillade's series *Fantômas* (1913–14), and *Les Vampires* (1915–16). The influence of such films was decisive during the years of encounters,

1 Robert Desnos, 'Cinéma d'avant-garde', *Documents* 7 (December 1929), pp. 385–7; reprinted in Desnos, *Cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); translated in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), pp. 36–8.

discussions and public manifestations preceding the emergence of surrealism.

Towards the end of the 1920s Desnos reviewed the contribution which the movement made to the evolution of the early French cinema, and argued that the encounter between film and surrealism did not occasion 'works of art' or 'a new aesthetic', but created an outlet to 'profound, original impulses' that needed to be given a new form.² Issues of form and language were at the centre of the debates that, during the 1920s and the 1930s, confronted surrealism with avant-garde tendencies within, or on the boundaries of, the film industry. The evolution of French cinema from the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès to the advent of sound in 1929 to 1930 coincides with one of the most effervescent periods in literary and art history. The influence of cinema, as the epitome of modernity, was considerable among the young generation of writers, most of whom saw in its populist character an iconoclastic stance that supported their critique of academicism and tradition. Alongside Dadaist writers and cubist, futurist or constructivist painters of the time, surrealists hoped that the new medium would provide a 'revolutionary' language which would overcome both the static nature of painting and the shortcomings of spoken or written language – becoming the medium of academic art.

The analysis of the two-fold relationship between cinema and the artistic avant garde of the 1920s and the 1930s illuminates issues related to both theories of film and language in the arts, especially in photography and painting. Most of the artists who made early experiments with film were Dadaist painters (like Duchamp) or had been involved in photography (for example, Man Ray) before becoming interested in the cinema. The founding members of the surrealist movement in Paris (Philippe Soupault, Benjamin Péret, Louis Aragon and Robert Desnos) started to write film reviews and short scenarios years before the publication of the First Surrealist Manifesto in 1924. The period immediately preceding the emergence of surrealism was for most of these writers 'the age of cinema', as Breton suggestively called it in his retrospective article 'Comme dans un bois'.³ Interesting connections can be made between the discovery of the cinematographic image, of editing, and the 'automatic writing' proposed by Breton and his friends as a deconstructivist technique, uncovering the unconscious processes of desire in their fragmentary, illogical form, opposed to the propensity towards coherence and 'totality' of the analytical discourse and analytical thought.

The relationship between the literary avant garde, in particular surrealism, and early French cinema goes back to the mid 1910s, long before the crystallization of the movement and the publication of its first manifesto. As early as 1916, Breton's encounter with Vaché (which left an indelible mark on the movement) was influenced by their common 'chance encounters' with the cinema.

2 Ibid.

3 André Breton, 'Comme dans un bois', *L'Âge du cinéma*, nos. 4–5, (1951), pp. 26–30; reprinted in *La Clé des champs* (Paris: Pauvert, 1953), pp. 241–6.

4 I agreed particularly well with Jacques Vaché in appreciating nothing so much as dropping in at a movie house when what was playing was playing, at any point in the show. And we would leave at the first sign of boredom – or surfeit – to rush off to another movie house where we behaved in the same way, and so on'. Ibid.

5 Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: a Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 12.

6 See, for example, Philippe Soupault, 'Note 1 on the cinema', *SIC*, no. 25 (January 1918); reprinted in *Écrits de cinéma 1918–1931* (Paris: Plon, 1979), pp. 23–4: 'One day on an empty lot in Vincennes, before an assembled crowd of idlers, an individual named Pathé presented a cinematograph invented by the Lumière brothers: man was endowed with a new eye. After that, those who worked busily with this extraordinary invention deceived themselves terribly; they made cinema the colourless mirror and mute echo of the theatre. No one has stopped making this mistake. However, since the means that the cinema makes available to the artist are quite different from those of the theatre, it's important to establish a difference between the screen and the stage, to separate cinematographic art from theatrical art'. Author's emphasis.

7 Paul Romain, 'L'Influence du rêve sur le cinéma', *Ciné-Ciné-pour-tous*, no. 40 (1 July 1925), p. 8; translated in Richard Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism: 1907–1929*, Volume I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 362–3.

The fascination they experienced with the celluloid images originated in a deliberate enhancement of the impression of *dépaysement* that film could create.⁴ It is doubtful that surrealism ever succeeded in validating its practice of automatic writing in film, although the suggestion for such spontaneous expression of one's deepest feelings and desires might have come from the cinema, as well as from Freudian investigations of the unconscious. The surprising juxtaposition of distant realities – which, in surrealist terms, best described the revelatory nature of the poetic image – closely resembles the effects of elementary montage in film. Pierre Reverdy, as well as other writers who later joined the surrealist movement, discovered, around 1918–19, the fascinating ability of cinematographic editing to rapidly connect distant aspects of reality in a manner that was incidentally mentioned by Breton with reference to Eluard's poetry, in the First Surrealist Manifesto. The effect of *dépaysement* that surrealists sought to achieve was closely related to Man Ray's collages and use of montage technique in his 'rayograms', following in the steps of Duchamp's Dadaist 'readymades'.⁵ All these experiments point to the association of surrealist concepts (such as the *dépaysement*) with cinematographic processes. The recombination of various objects that have been taken out of their customary environment characterizes both the collage and the film editing technique.

What situates surrealist commentaries on film within contemporary debates is the insistence on the ability offered by the new medium to 'visualize dreams', to bridge reality and imagination. This will constitute the guiding principle for the appropriation of cinema among the representative manifestations of the movement. Even before the existence of a surrealist group, Soupault, Aragon and Desnos published articles in which they expressed a common understanding of films in their relationship to dreams, to 'visions' appealing more to the imagination than to the sights with which the spectator's eye is familiar, and which she/he expects to see. The stress placed on the role of the *eye* and the ability to see beyond everyday reality is present very early on in surrealist writings.⁶ Surrounded by various, and sometimes conflicting, theories of film, ranging from 'purism' and abstract cinema to impressionism or naturalism, surrealists defined their position in response to current productions and current writings on the cinema by highlighting its 'purely visual' quality and often praising the absence of sound, of colour, at the expense of 'specific' features mostly identified with *rhythm* and *movement*. It must be said that they were not the only ones in search of a new and distinctive 'cinematographic' language. Paul Romain, for example, talked about the identical nature of dreams and cinema, and took inspiration from Sigmund Freud's remark that dreams remain 'untranslatable in words, [and] can only be expressed by means of images'.⁷ He even goes as far as to say

8 Ibid., p. 363.

9 Antonin Artaud, 'Cinéma et réalité', *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 170 (1 November 1927); reprinted in Artaud, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume III (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 22.

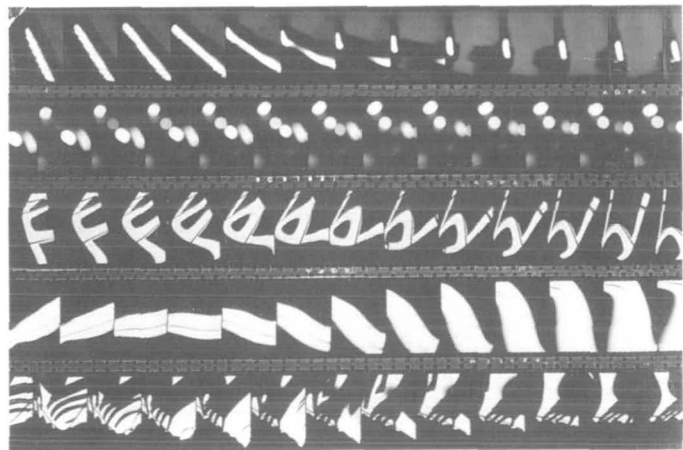
10 'The difference between Dada and surrealist films thus lies in their different strategies of defamiliarizing social reality. Surrealist filmmakers largely rely on conventional cinematography (narratives, optical realism, characters) as means to draw the viewer into the reality produced by the film. The incoherent, non-narrative, illogical nature of Dada films, which constantly defamiliarize the familiar world through cinematic manipulations, never lets the viewer enter the world of the film.' Rudolf Kuenzli, 'Introduction', in Kuenzli (ed.) *Dada and Surrealist Film* (New York: Willis Locker and Owens, 1987), p. 10.

11 Man Ray, 'Témoignages', *Études cinématographiques*, nos. 38–9, p. 43; quoted in English from Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film*, p. 3.

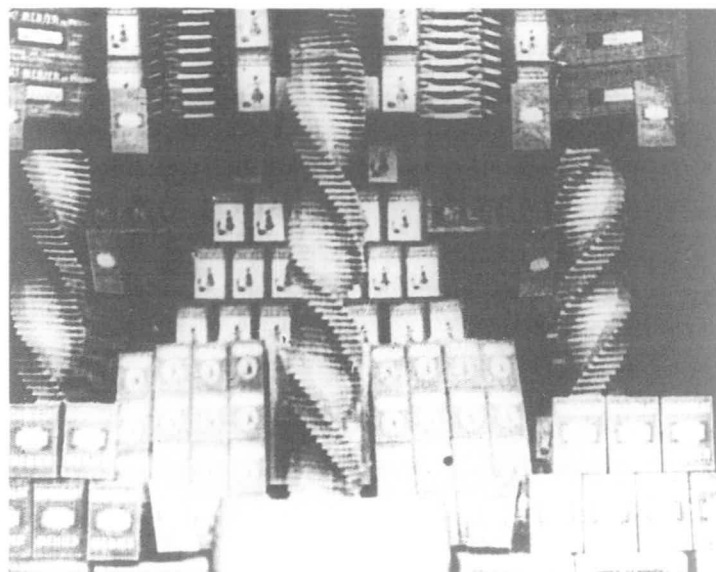
Emak Bakia. Picture courtesy: BFI Stills; © Man Ray Trust/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998.

that 'all the expressive and visual processes of the cinema are found in dream. . . . The simultaneity of actions, soft-focus images, dissolves, super-impositions, distortion, the doubling of images, slow motion.'⁸

In their search for a pure 'cinematographic' language, surrealists carefully distinguished themselves from abstract cinema, of which Artaud (among others) was equally critical. The terms in which he formulates the surrealist approach to filmmaking justifies Kuenzli's contention on the difference between Dada and surrealist experiments in the cinema. Artaud argues that one cannot be moved by 'geometrical lines' or anything else that the eye is not able to 'recognize or classify', that is neither 'known or imagined'.⁹ In contrasting Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1926) and Buñuel's and Dalí's *Un Chien andalou*, for example, one has to admit that the latter relies on a 'recognizable' reality within which it explodes conventions and artificial boundaries with the imaginary.¹⁰ Two different approaches can be identified in contrasting *Emak Bakia* (or, indeed, Léger's *Ballet mécanique* [1925]) and *Un Chien andalou*. Man Ray explicitly acknowledged that his early experiments with film were a possibility of extending his work in photography, although he preferred the static medium to the moving image. The way in which he uses and 'comments' on the new medium, with the intention 'to put the photographic composition that [he] made into motion',¹¹ invites a detached contemplation of images as pictorial compositions *with a difference* – that is, a stylistic and aesthetic exercise that remains far from the 'convulsive beauty' and the participatory attitude encouraged by surrealist creations. The shock effect on which the avant garde relies for both destroying existing conventions and establishing a more direct relationship to the viewer is reduced – in Léger's case for example – to a desire to irritate or annoy the audience (according to his own confessions on the subject)



Ballet mécanique. Picture courtesy: BFI Stills; © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998.



by the repetition of visual patterns, movements that create a certain rhythm. His *Ballet mécanique* is an eloquent illustration of his aesthetic of the 'mechanical period', closely observed in the film through sequences that live exclusively on the accelerated movement, starting with the girl in the swing, and culminating with a whole range of abstract or *real* configurations: numbers, geometric figures, machine parts, Christmas ornaments, the washer-woman climbing stairs. The last sequence of *Emak Bakia* shows a woman filmed from above, lying down, with her eyes apparently open. She stares blankly at the camera. In the next shot she gets up, faces the camera and opens her eyes, to the surprise of the viewer who now realizes that what she/he had seen was a pair of eyes painted on the woman's eyelids. The enticing suggestion of the image that follows (the woman closes her eyes again, lies down, and a superimposition of her face with closed eyes appears upside down) points to the surrealist theory of the revelatory nature of a sort of *blinded sight*. The miraculous is only unravelled to the eyes that close on the outside world, and open to the inside world of dreams and desires, of the imaginary. In *Ballet mécanique*, the same actress that appeared in *Emak Bakia* opens and closes her eyes repeatedly, but this time only to provide another instance of rhythmic movement, similar to her mouth breaking rhythmically into a smile.¹²

One of the most adequate presentations of the surrealist project in the cinema belongs to Jean Goudal, who wrote as early as 1925 that the 'cinematographic' image represented: 'a conscious hallucination, and utilizes this fusion of dream and consciousness which surrealism would like to see realized in the literary domain'.¹³ The same

¹² Ibid., p. 4.

¹³ See Jean Goudal, 'Surréalisme et cinéma', *La Revue hebdomadaire*, no. 8 (February 1925), pp. 343–57, translated in Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, pp. 49–56.

- 14 René Gardies – 'Le Cinéma est-il surréaliste?', *Europe*, nos 475–6, special issue 'Surréalisme' (1968), p. 152.
- 15 Louis Aragon, 'Du décor', *Le Film*, no. 131 (16 September 1918), pp. 8–10; translated as 'On décor', in Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, pp. 28–31.
- 16 Louis Aragon referred to this verse from Mallarmé's 'Salut' in the following sentence ending his article 'On décor': 'When, before the naked screen lit by the projector's solitary beam, will we have that sense of formidable virginity / The white awareness of our canvas? / O purity, purity!' See Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, p. 31.
- 17 *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, reprinted by José Corti, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1980), p. 12.
- 18 Thinking of the tense relationship between Artaud and the central surrealist group after 1926, when he was expelled on political grounds, his omission from the group of surrealist filmmakers somehow called for a substitution, an appropriation of the work of Hugnet, who – as the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* tells us – 'permanently' joined the movement in 1933. His scenario, on which Henri d'Archer made a film in 1929, remains falsely associated to the surrealist movement. See Ado Kyrou, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (Paris: Le Terrain vague, 1963), p. 189.
- 19 Soupault, 'Note 1 sur le cinéma', p. 24.

argument of the hallucinatory nature of cinema was taken up by Breton in his article 'Comme dans un bois', published in the special edition of *L'Age du cinéma* dedicated to surrealism. Goudal's pertinent critique, to which Breton referred in his own retrospective presentation of surrealist cinema, attempted to show that the search for a new, non-verbal language which dominated the early days of the movement, was actually accomplished in the discovery of the 'camera-eye', and the free syntax of film. An art of desire, of illusion, but also a medium of the greatest evocative power in terms of concrete details, cinema offered the 'privileged instrument for de-realizing the world' ('*déréalisation du monde*'), and the means for an alchemical 'transmutation of reality'.¹⁴ The so-called '*cinégraphie*' (a term borrowed, surprisingly, from Dulac) held the promise of a miraculous, non-verbal language that announced 'a new, audacious aesthetic, a sense of modern beauty'.¹⁵ Breton called for the abolition of artificial boundaries between what we see and what we only 'begin to see', or have never seen before. Surrealism senses the miraculous potential of the cinema in this direction of the *unseen*, the *unknown*. Suggestions of inspired or visionary 'blindness', as well as comments on the 'white awareness of our canvas'¹⁶ define the unique position of surrealism in the context of the film theory and practice of French avant-garde groups of the 1920s and 1930s.

Although the number of films on which surrealists agreed and which they considered representative of their aesthetics has always been controversial, there are, however, a few examples that received unanimous acclaim. Two of these successful experiments of surrealism in the cinema belong to Luis Buñuel, the only artist of the movement who continued to make movies after the first two decades of avant-garde effervescence. *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or* (1930) are by far the most commented-on illustrations of the surrealist project in the cinema. They do not, however, exhaust the list of possible titles associated with the movement during the 1920s and 1930s. The *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* that appeared in 1938 gives the following 'main surrealist films' instead of any definition of film: Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* and *L'Etoile de mer* (1928), Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic cinéma* (1925), Georges Hugnet's *La Perle* (1929), and Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *Le [sic] Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or*.¹⁷ There is one significant omission in this list – Antonin Artaud – and one peculiar addition – Georges Hugnet.¹⁸ The production and publication of scenarios represented the first, and most fruitful, manifestation of surrealist activity in the cinema. The poem-scenario offered an introduction to more complex ways of appropriating the cinematic 'language'. One of the earliest writings of this kind is Philippe Soupault's 'Indifference',¹⁹ a short scenario placed at the end of his well-known article calling for the liberation of the 'new eye of man' (the camera) from the constraints imposed by literary or theatrical conventions.

The fascination experienced by all surrealist artists with emblematic objects of modernity – the whole paraphernalia of technical accessories attached to urban living – left a powerful imprint on the poetry of the group and, ultimately, shaped the ‘vocabulary’ of surrealist dreams, the imagery of their ‘poem-scenarios’ and of their films. In the same article of 1918, Aragon remarked that :

Before the appearance of the cinematograph hardly any artist dared use the false harmony of machines and the obsessive beauty of commercial inscriptions, posters, evocative lettering, really common objects, everything that celebrates life, not some artificial convention that excludes corned beef and tins of polish. Today these courageous precursors, painters or poets, witness their own triumph, they who knew how to be moved by a newspaper or a packet of cigarettes, when the public thrills and communes with them before the kind of decor whose beauty they had predicated.²⁰

The poetry of the modern world, filtering Baudelaire’s symbolism through the visually daring technique of painters like Picasso and Georges Braque, achieves its most striking expression on the screen where the closeup allows the isolation and ‘magnification’ of the object taken out of its usual context, stripped of its utility and rendered to a world of fantastic correlations.²¹ Even such controversial issues as the specificity of the cinematographic language become related, in Aragon’s view, to the unique selective quality of the camera, and the semantic and philosophical implications of focus within the visual syntax of film:

on the screen objects that were a few moments ago sticks of furniture or books of cloakroom tickets are transformed to the point where they take on menacing or enigmatic meanings. The theatre is powerless where such emotive concentration is concerned. To endow with a poetic value that which does not possess it, to wilfully restrict the field of vision as to intensify expression: these are two properties that help make cinematic decor the adequate setting of modern beauty.²²

The use of the decor in *Un Chien andalou* responds to the expectations set by Aragon in his essay on the cinema. There is nothing else, Buñuel seems to argue alongside Artaud, than the very surface, the ‘skin’ of things that are stripped of any conventional meaning attached to them. The box with diagonal stripes which the man in *Un Chien andalou* wears hanging around his neck has the mysterious quality of a dreamed object, only here the absence of any logical justification or utility of such an object is part of everyday reality. It is worth noting that the same box reappears in the car-accident sequence, where the death of the woman seems to be at the

²⁰ Louis Aragon, ‘Du décor’, in Soupault, ‘Note 1 sur le cinéma’, p. 28.

²¹ Ibid., p. 30.

²² Ibid., p. 28.

same time presented as a *fait divers*, and a curious consequence of the fascination she experiences for the severed hand lying in the middle of the road. Objects are 'crystallizations' of events that subsist in the characters' consciousness, and can at times directly interfere with the course of their existence. The scene in which the man angrily attacks the woman, while dragging behind him a number of innocuously 'articulated' objects, remains an epitome of this surrealist conception by which things encapsulate human experiences, emotions, conflicts, and – ultimately – time:

We see passing by first a cork, then a melon, two Brothers from a parochial school and last two magnificent grand pianos. The pianos are filled with the rotting corpses of donkeys whose hooves, tails, rumps and excrement overflow. When one of the pianos passes the camera we see a big donkey head resting on the keyboard'.²³

23 Quoted, in translation, in J.H. Matthews, *Surrealism and Film* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1971), p. 87.

This is the surrealist decor *par excellence*, a perfect illustration of Aragon's remarks on the role of setting in cinema. In the final sequence of the film, the two characters will come across the objects that 'haunted' their existence – the mysterious box with diagonal stripes, the cyclist's costume, the bicycle (mentioned in the script, but not actually shown in the film) – and that somehow infest and reify their bodies after death. The two lovers are seen buried up to their chests in the sand of the beach, heads bent down, like human-shaped refuse, or, more adequately, two grotesque funeral busts.

The image of the slit eye, as well as Artaud's severed head in a bowl (in *La Coquille et le clergyman* [1928]) belong to a family of similar visual syntagmas that announce the emergence of a new language, the cinematographic syntax of Artaud's and Buñuel's films, from the time when they appeared in the poems and automatic writings of the early 1920s. The desire to shock is also a need to break the frame of the traditional narrative, which the surrealist film appropriates through parody. The undermining of the diegetic process takes place in terms of both temporal and spatial determinations. First, the intertitles that Buñuel uses in *Un Chien andalou* ('Once upon a time'; 'Eight years later'; 'Towards three in the morning'; 'In the spring') are indicative of the parodic treatment of the conventions of the silent cinema. Temporal discontinuity results from such deliberately irrelevant, absurd 'break points' that also correspond to sudden changes in setting.²⁴ From the apartment which (according to the script) is located 'at the third floor from the street' on which the man is seen cycling, the 'story' progresses through spaces that radically contradict the claustrophobic interior where everything is prone to decay. The view of a park in summer, where the character that the young man shoots inside the room is seen falling beside the nude figure of a woman who dissolves at his touch, and the beach onto which one of the doors of the apartment opens unexpectedly, are two instances of dazzling spatial discontinuity.

24 Richard Abel, *French Cinema: the First Wave, 1915–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 482.

Buñuel, as well as Breton, Desnos, Aragon or Soupault, continued to seek for and signal the presence of surrealist ideas and images – mainly based on the spark of poetic associations that disrupt the conventional order of things – in films that were produced either within or on the borders of commercial cinema. Art cinema never represented the ‘obvious choice’ for surrealists. That is why Carl Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (1928), for example, was unequivocally dismissed as ‘artificial’ and ‘pretentious’ – probably in the same way in which *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919) seemed artificial to René Crevel – whereas *King Kong* (Ernest Schoedsack and Merien Cooper, 1935) was warmly received. Such distinctions may appear paradoxical to those who do not know the theoretical position that surrealists supported as to the use and function of ‘trick shots’, settings and light – the ‘technical’ aspects of cinema should contribute to heightening the impression of reality, and not attempt to ‘substitute’ reality with an imaginary/artificial world. However clumsy the special effects of *King Kong* might have seemed to the surrealist film critic Jean Levy, who first saw the film in the company of the technicians who had been working on it, he was undeterred in praising the quality and suggestiveness of its images.²⁵ The director’s technical skill has never scored high in the surrealists’ ranking, and films that figured in the lists of revolutionary production were there for their poetic action, as Desnos argued. What mattered when contrasting films such as *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* and *King Kong* was not the evaluation of technical procedures, but the associations, and suggestions which trick shots and lighting effects might occasion. Both films ventured beyond the boundaries of realism, either in adopting a ‘point of view’, a ‘subjective’ approach to historical events, or in entering the domain of science-fiction stories. Nevertheless, Dreyer’s predominant concern with formal experimenting was harshly condemned by Jacques Brunius in his *En marge du cinéma français*:

Here is a question of affectation of style, of photographic Gongorism without any relationship to the meaning of images, testifying to the silly pretentiousness of the author. It pleases me to repeat once again here that *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is one of the most stinking films I’ve ever seen.²⁶

Such distinctions should guide the analysis of contemporary productions and film theories in their relationship to surrealism. Not everything that challenges the limits of realist theories of film can or should be associated with the surrealist project. One controversial case is the Italian neorealist school that, in a certain sense, shared the surrealist aspiration towards *une réalité rehaussée* (heightened or elevated reality). However, the approach and style were considerably different, especially if one has in mind Rossellini’s *Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Paisa* (1946), which marked the

25 ‘The animals show signs of painful stiffness, all the more inexplicable because certain movements are strikingly true (I am thinking of King Kong’s action in exploring the rocks with his hand and receiving a knife wound). As for the effects of back projection, if they fit in with the rest of the film with surprising virtuosity, the least skilled eye will not fail to be troubled by the confusion in perspective ignored by the camera men during filming.... Nothing of all this, by the way, worries me.’ Quoted in Matthews, *Surrealism and Film*, p. 16.

26 Jacques B. Brunius, *En marge du cinéma français* (Paris: Arcanes, 1954); quoted, in translation, in Matthews, *Surrealism and Film*, p. 17.

27 Gianni Rondolino, *Roberto Rossellini* (Torino: UTET, 1989), p. 8.

emergence of the Italian neorealist cinema.²⁷ However, what brings the two movements closer is their interest in the documentary, and the critical quality of so-called *ciné-verité*, with its social propensity (as illustrated especially by De Sica), its interest in individual, deviant psychology (as in Visconti's *Ossessione* [1942]). Neorealism embodied the Italian reaction to Hollywood classical narrative, an implicitly 'subversive', anti-commercial stance that could not have passed unnoticed in surrealist circles. The emergent Italian 'film school' was seen, during the late 1940s, as representing an attempt to use the authenticity of the newsreel and documentary style in feature films, in sharp contrast to the American 'dream factory' style:

Si parlo allora, esplicitamente, di una scuola italiana, di un modello cinematografico che aveva proprie caratteristiche contenutistiche e formali, alquanto diverse da quelle consuete, non soltanto del cinema hollywoodiano, ma anche di quello europeo, francese in particolare. L'americano Ira Peck poteva scrivere che il film [*Roma città aperta*] comunicava il senso dell'autenticità del cinegiornale e possedeva un realismo 'che i film di Hollywood erano solo disposti a suggerire.

(So they were explicitly talking about an Italian school, a cinematographic model which had its own content and formal characteristics, that were somehow different to those specific not only to Hollywood cinema but even to European, and in particular to French cinema. The American Ira Peck could write that the film [*Roma città aperta*] expressed the sense of authenticity of the newsreel and had a realism which Hollywood films were only prepared to suggest.)²⁸

Buñuel's own experiments with the short documentary film went back to *Las Hurdes* (1932), which immediately followed his two programmatic surrealist films. Revealing the mysterious, paradoxical and irrational side of everyday existence, while leaving the realistic conventions of the film unaltered, was one of the dearest aspirations of surrealist cinema from the early 1920s. Nevertheless, Buñuel's categorical public dismissal of neorealism during the 1950s questions the validity of this *rapprochement*. 'Neorealist reality', Buñuel argued, 'is incomplete, official and above all reasonable; but poetry, mystery, all that completes and enlarges tangible reality, is completely absent from its works'.²⁹ The most serious objection against the new Italian cinema referred to its excessive concern with form, a fact that seems to take on the argument of the late 1920s and early 1930s between the impressionist school and the surrealists:

What is the use of all this visual ornamentation if the situations, the motives animating the characters, their reactions, and the very subject matter are all based on the most sentimental, most conformist literature?³⁰

28 Ibid., p. 87.

29 Louis Buñuel, speaking at the University of Mexico on poetry and cinema; quoted in Matthews, *Surrealism and Film*, p. 140.

30 Ibid., p. 146.

31 Ibid., p. 107.

The surrealist propensity towards the documentary, as illustrated by Buñuel's *Las Hurdes*, originated in the attempt to explode realist boundaries from within, by infiltrating an accurate account of events with a sense of the arbitrary, of the inexplicable, the absurd. When commenting on *Las Hurdes*, J.H. Matthews remarks that Buñuel did not start from a scenario, and made no effort to construct a narrative from the shots that apparently are presented to the spectators in a wholly accidental succession.³¹ The 'pitiless' immobility of the camera in front of horrifying images achieves 'the shock to the eye' theorized by surrealist writings on film, while pushing the *ciné-verité* or documentary genre far beyond conventional limits.

32 Ibid.

The effect of the static camera, pitilessly immobile before cretinous children, is paralysing in horror. The role usually given the spectator during the projection of film documentaries is radically changed: Buñuel instructs by replacing enjoyment with suffering, as he provokes us to revolt against our passivity as mere onlookers. Where the documentary familiarly rests upon acceptance, the surrealist documentary of Buñuel is intended to solicit rejection.³²

The relationship between surrealism and the Italian cinema changes if we look at the late 1950s and the early 1960s, and consider the work of directors such as Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni. In his comprehensive study *Amour-érotisme et cinéma*, Ado Kyrou is critical of Fellini's flaunting 'modernist' technique, while praising Antonioni's 'authenticity', although – ultimately – he points out that 'eroticism' plays an essential role in both filmmaker's conception of the cinema, a fact which aligns them with surrealist writers and directors.

Fellini, qui se veut 'moderne' et 'original', est en réalité un excellent technicien, qui, très attiré par la psychanalyse (ce qui en soit n'est pas un tort) et par le christianisme (ce qui est un tort), nous donné des images érotiques torturées et parfois franchement dégoulinantes (dans *Otto e mezzo* [1963] par exemple). Il y a quand même de jolies scènes d'amour dans *La dolce vita* (1959) et de curieuses scènes érotiques, très oniriques, dans *Giulia degli spiriti* (1964).

(Fellini, who wants to be 'modern' and 'original', is actually an excellent technician, who, being attracted by psychoanalysis [which is not a mistake in itself] and by Christianity [which is a mistake], gives us erotic images of a tortured and, at times, outright disgusting nature [in *Otto e mezzo*, 1963, for example]. There are however nice love scenes in *La dolce vita* [1959] and strange, very dream-like erotic scenes, in *Giulia degli spiriti* [1964].)³³

33 Ado Kyrou, in Éric Losfeld (ed.), *Amour-érotisme et cinéma* (Paris, 1966), p. 205.

Here again the director's concern with psychoanalysis seems to come in the way of genuine poetic expression, although not so much as an apparent interest in Christianity, which *is* a mistake in itself, Ado Kyrrou remarks. Eroticism, it seems, is 'corrupted', 'betrayed' by the association with psychology or religion, and, instead of having the expected liberating effect on the viewer, it comes out 'tortured' and 'disgusting'. Antonioni's approach gains more respect from Kyrrou; who sees in him a worthy successor to surrealism:

Antonioni est beaucoup plus important, bien que sa plus récente évolution (*La notte* [1960] et *Il deserto rosso*, 1964, surtout) m'inquiète: en effet, toutes ces qualités semblent devenir grimaces et ses sujets se ramènent à des lieux communs du genre : 'Ah! ma pauvre dame, ce qu'il est difficile de vivre à notre époque!'. J'exagère, certes, mais c'est parce que j'aime beaucoup Antonioni et que je considère la majorité de ses films comme des magnifiques analyses de l'amour

(Antonioni is much more important, although his latest evolution [*La notte*, 1960, and, especially, *Il deserto rosso*, 1964] worries me: in fact, all these qualities seem to become grimaces and his subjects evolve around common places like: 'Ah! My poor lady, isn't life difficult these days!'. I exaggerate, of course, but only because I love Antonioni very much and I believe that the majority of his films are wonderful analyses of love.)³⁴

What Ado Kyrrou is looking for in all these later developments of the surrealist theory is a definition of reality that brings out the inexplicable, the absurd in everyday situations, and situates the imagination at the centre of a character's existence. For Antonioni, he comments:

la réalité est faite de mille signes et tous les éléments absurdes ou insolites d'un quotidien, bien situé socialement, déterminent la sensibilité mise à nue de personnes que l'auteur aime ou déteste mais qui, de toutes façons, vivent une vie où l'imaginaire est aussi important que la réalité superficielle.

(To Antonioni, reality is made out of thousands of signs and all the absurd or queer elements of an everyday life, which is socially well situated, determine the stripped sensibility of characters whom the author loves or hates but who, nevertheless, live a life where the imaginary and the superficial reality are equally important.)³⁵

The central place assigned to the imagination, and, in relation to this, to the figure of the eye which polarizes the multiple connotations of visual representation ('visionarism', 'revelation'), is also dealt with in a number of contemporary studies of surrealist cinema and surrealist film theory. Mary Ann Caws's book, *The Eye In the Text*, opens with an enticing investigation of the semantics of

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 205–6.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 206.

36 Mary Ann Caws, *The Eye in the Text: Essays on Perception, Mannerist to Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

37 Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg (eds), *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The MIT Press, 1991).

38 Williams, *Figures of Desire*.

the eye in modern French poetry, which then leads to a consideration of the 'gesture', the 'gaze' and the 'mirror' from Baroque and Rococo aesthetics to Dada and surrealist art.³⁶ The last chapter of the book illustrates such theoretical considerations with reference to René Clair's 'Baroque lighting', and the 'cinema of the central eye' in Saint-Pol-Roux's writings. Again the emphasis is set on the distinctive role of imagination, and its 'revelatory' power which relies on the special perception of 'the third eye', 'the central eye' – a figure ultimately capable of justifying, in the author's view 'a cinema of the text'. Unfortunately, in this final correlation between text and cinematographic image the dominant area of reference is the former, despite an occasional mention of Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) as well as of Robbe-Grillet's film *L'Immortelle* (1962).

Issues of surrealism and visual representation also form the subject matter of the collection of essays edited by Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg.³⁷ This is an original contribution to the study of the movement, as it uniquely focuses on the works of women surrealists, and attempts to investigate the role and image of such artists within a 'male discourse'. The valuable insight that it provides into the misogyny of famous surrealist texts (such as Breton's *L'Amour fou*, intended to celebrate the woman as the supreme object of love and desire) is nevertheless restricted to photography, painting, collage and literature. The book completely eludes equally relevant aspects of surrealist and Dadaist films that illuminate the complex interaction between male and female representation and desires. J.H. Matthews's commentaries on Buñuel's films after the 1930s (*Ensayo de un crimen* [1955], *Viridiana* [1961], *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* [1964], *Belle de Jour* [1966]) represent one of the few informed contributions to this complex topic with special reference to film. The overtly political, feminist stance of *Surrealism and Women* succeeds in its re-evaluation of the contribution of such generally ignored female surrealist writers and artists as Joyce Mansour, Eileen Agar and Leonora Carrington, while failing to establish any connections between the male and female representation of the human body, their different patterns of unconscious desire, as they appear in 'classical' works of the movement such as *Un Chien andalou*. A more relevant analysis of feminist issues in their relation to surrealist cinema is provided by Linda Williams's comprehensive study, *Figures of Desire*.³⁸ Her interpretation of Buñuel's later work, and its relevance to the surrealist legacy in contemporary cinema, is supported by a detailed theoretical investigation of 'the image in pre-surrealist poetic theory' and of the surrealist image from a Lacanian perspective which questions the validity of traditional Freudian considerations on the processes of the unconscious. It is partly because of this rarely used Lacanian approach that her study deals efficiently with feminist

issues in the context of understated misogyny, violence and deviant psychology which permeates surrealist cinema from the mid 1920s to its most recent manifestations. It is also worth mentioning that, alongside her analysis of two of Buñuel's more recent films (*The Phantom of Liberty* [1974], and *That Obscure Object of Desire* [1977]) Williams deals with questions of female vs male psychology and sexual representation in *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or*.

The relationship between the paradigm of the eye and that of the feminine as object of desire and elusive image has resurfaced in the work of recent filmmakers, as well as film theorists. Postmodern cinema has recycled prominent surrealist motifs, especially in the French cultural area, where Buñuel's first films had considerable impact. In recent years, Jean-Jacques Beineix's *37.2° le matin/Betty Blue* (1986) represents the closest re-evaluation of the erotic/neurotic paradigm associated with the surrealist model. Due to the structural demands of a full-length feature film, *Betty Blue* seems to discard the dazzling fragmentary, illogical succession of shots that are usually a characteristic of surrealist cinema. Instead, narrative continuity, as well as the use of an omniscient narrator (Zorg, played by Jean-Hugues Anglade) who recalls the events as they unfold, ensure complete intelligibility, and absolute transparency of the story. But this very clarity is the frame which gradually crumbles from within, undermined by the extreme violence and unpredictability of the characters' reactions. Their passionate love affair oscillates dangerously on the edge between voluptuousness and crime, between the frenzy of living to the full and mad, self-destructive impulses. The dark territories that Beineix explores through the story of Zorg (a young, unpublished writer) and Betty (his beautiful, passionate companion) are illuminated by the strange interwoven signs of *amour fou* and death, humour and destruction. There are at least two obvious references to *Un Chien andalou*, both of which indicate Beineix's subtle distancing from Buñuel's and the surrealist model. The first, and most interesting, relates to the figure of the eye, as it appears in the introductory sequence of *Un Chien andalou*. Whereas in Buñuel's film the slit eye marked the paroxystic and frustrated male desire that was exerted on a passive, female subject, the final part of *Betty Blue* situates the heroine at the centre of an almost initiatic descent into madness (where her lover-writer cannot, and would not, follow her), a violent evolution which culminates in self-mutilation. Surprisingly, this extreme act of self-destruction concentrates on the same symbolic element: the eye. Betty, in an excess of madness, pokes her own eye out before plunging into a state of shock, staring blankly, unconscious, tied to a hospital bed. Her passivity is only reached after a devastating struggle with the indifference, aggression and mediocrity of a male-dominated world, epitomized in the film by the owner of the barracks by the sea which she sets on fire in her first act of rebellion. To Zorg, who is

39 See Abel, *French Cinema: the First Wave*; Williams, *Figures of Desire*.

outpaced by her uncompromising wish to challenge and vanquish all obstacles, she is 'out of control'. Betty is not the woman chased by her lover in *Un Chien andalou*, the 'obscure object of desire' passively participating in events. Beineix's representation of the woman rejects the implicit idealization that the succession of shots following the introductory 'slit eye' sequence of *Un Chien andalou* proposes. In Buñuel's film, the woman appears unharmed by the shocking mutilation that the spectator witnesses at the beginning. The relationship between the young man or the 'androgynous'³⁹ and the woman seems to seek, throughout the film, a symbolic reiteration of the initial frustrated desire. The woman, as figure of desire, escapes perception, the same as the slit eye is the sign of a 'blinded', forever unsatiated, passion. In Beineix's film, the woman is as much the subject of sexual enjoyment as she is the object of the man's desire. She is constantly challenging his authority, asserting her own, 'uncontrolled' desires. And when she enacts the male violent assault in self-mutilation, the viewer is not spared the horror of seeing her (and, in retrospect, Buñuel's character) defaced by the loss of an eye. This difference is nevertheless 'corrected' in the end when Zorg chooses to kill his mad, unconscious lover who is unlikely to recover from the state of shock in which he finds her: inert, blankly staring with her remaining eye and, finally, 'under control'. Interestingly enough, in order to divert the attention of the doctors, Zorg dresses up as a woman, and, on his way to and from the hospital, he crosses a deserted street, getting drenched by the rain. This is the second, suggestive reference to *Un Chien andalou*, recalling the androgynous who cycles in the rain down a deserted street, at the beginning of the film. Other interesting oblique mentions of surrealist motifs appear in the close association of a death bed and a grand piano, only this time the piano is an element of subversion, outraging with its sound the supporters of the last dignified bourgeois institution: death.

Jean-Jacques Beineix's film is one example of the possible re-evaluation of surrealist themes and motifs in contemporary cinema. The interest that recent studies of the surrealist contribution to film have created for such and other experiments 'at the boundaries' of commercial cinema proves that the theoretical model elaborated during the first three decades of the evolution of the movement can still set in motion subversive, innovative powers, able to explode current clichés and free the imagination of generations of filmmakers and viewers still to come.

Distraction and redemption: Kracauer, surrealism and phenomenology

IAN AITKEN

In this paper I intend to argue that a shared concern with indeterminacy and the concrete links German film theory with avant-garde movements such as French surrealism. The paper will examine this relationship through an analysis of the film theory of Siegfried Kracauer, concentrating on Kracauer's interpretation of surrealism, and developing a cinematic model which integrates elements of surrealism with Kracauerian phenomenology and naturalism. I will begin with a summary of Kracauer's theory of reality and representation, and will then examine Kracauer's position on surrealism. The paper will conclude by examining the issue of realism within surrealism, particularly in relation to the films of Buñuel, proposing a cinematic model which integrates surrealism, naturalism and phenomenology.

Kracauer's theory of reality and representation

One characteristic feature of critical debates on the cinema taking place in Germany during the 1920s was a belief that the systemic structures which dominated the individual within modernity were deeply inscribed within language, and that visual experience constituted an alternative domain of potential freedom.¹ The visual was seen as embodying a primal mode of communication which predated the rise of modernity, and which offered the possibility of a

¹ See Sabine Hake, 'Towards a philosophy of film', in *The Cinema's Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany 1907–1933* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 131.

2 See Gertrud Koch, 'Bela Balazs: the physiognomy of things', *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), p. 177.

3 Hake, 'Towards a philosophy', p. 132.

4 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: the Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 292-3.

5 D.N. Rodowick, 'The last things before the last', *New German Critique*, no. 54 (1991), p. 115.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

7 Kracauer, 'Cult of distraction: on Berlin's picture palaces', in *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), pp. 94-6.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

9 Heide Schlüppmann, 'Phenomenology of film: on Siegfried Kracauer's writings of the 1920s', *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), p. 111.

10 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 3.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 298-300.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 299.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

return to sensory experience.² This critical discourse on the cinema was characterized by a concern for non-cognitive and irrationalist forms of expression, and by an emphasis on the concrete and immediate experience as means of 'seeing' the world through the veil of dominant ideologies.³

These ideas had an important influence on Kracauer's theory of film. Following Weber's contention that the individual was disenchanted, Kracauer argued that the modern subject's relationship to the world was a 'distracted' one.⁴ The concept of distraction employed by Kracauer amounted to the theorization of a form of visual and sensory experience of the modern environment, one in which an unfocused 'distracted' mode of being prevailed, leading to an impoverished and abstract encounter between the self and the world.⁵ Although originally a negative term, defined in opposition to the contemplative forms of concentration and more unified modes of experience associated with the high arts, the notion of distraction eventually took on more positive and radical connotations during the 1920s, becoming identified with non-bourgeois or proletarian modes of experience, and with alternatives to totalizing systems of rationality.⁶ Similar dialectical conceptions of distraction can be found in Kracauer, where distraction is both the product of abstraction and the mode of cognition through which the mass public can understand and transform their own experiences.⁷ Distraction, as experienced through the film, constitutes a legitimate mode of aesthetic experience, corresponding to the 'damaged condition of modernity' as a 'fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions' and as a 'montage of distractions'.⁸

Kracauer employed the concept of distraction to develop a realist aesthetic based on a supposed structural correspondence between the distracted modern condition and the particular forms of indeterminate mimesis found in film and photography,⁹ and one of the foundations of Kracauer's realism is this contention that both film form and the specific forms of spectatorship adopted within the film viewing experience correspond to the 'condition of modernity'.¹⁰ There is, in other words, a correspondence between the 'basic properties, affinities and identities' of the film medium, and the underlying properties of modernity.¹¹

However, Kracauer not only argues that film is 'realist' in the above sense, but that it is also redemptive, in that it offers the possibility of transcending the abstraction inherent within modernity through its ability to disclose the sensuous and ephemeral aspects of reality.¹² Kracauer argued that film came into being in order to fulfil two 'originating principles'. The first of these was a need to represent the fragmentation and abstraction which was characteristic of the modern condition.¹³ The second was the need to transcend that abstraction and 'redeem' reality through the empirical attributes of the film image. The value of film, therefore, lay in its potential to

14 Ibid., p. 298.

15 Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (1963) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977).

16 See Thomas Elsaesser, 'Cinema : the irresponsible signifier. Or, the gamble with history: film theory or cinema theory', *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), p. 70.

17 Ibid., p. 79.

18 Emmanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 176.

19 See Diane Colinson, 'Aesthetic experience', in O. Hanfling (ed.), *Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 137.

20 See John Kemp, *The Philosophy of Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 109.

redirect the spectator's attention to the 'texture of life' lost beneath the abstract discourses which regulate experience.¹⁴

Kracauer argued that mass culture had turned away from concrete experience and reason to produce a form of culture which he referred to as the 'mass ornament'.¹⁵ By this he meant new mediums such as cinema, and events characterized by extensive ornamental configurations, such as military parades and sporting competitions. Here, according to Kracauer, the real world of the individual had become 'desubstantiated', and replaced by spectacle: the 'functional but empty form of ritual' and the 'aesthetic reflex' of the dominant social rationality.¹⁶ Similarly, visual display had become presentational, iconic and emblematic, rather than representational.¹⁷ Kracauer also argued that the mass ornament marked a return of mythic thought into western culture, and that modern myth was another 'aesthetic reflex' of instrumental rationality. Far from representing a radical alternative to instrumental rationality, contemporary forms of mythic thought were central to the legitimization of capitalism because, like instrumental rationality, they arrested the processes of liberating and enlightening reason.

Kracauer's use of the ideas of distraction, abstraction and redemption was influenced by his reading of Kant. As already mentioned, Kracauer argued that mass culture was a culture of spectacle in which mythic thought and instrumental rationality distorted the operations of reason and the imagination, and there are clear similarities here with the Kantian model of the harmony of the faculties within aesthetic experience, where the role of the understanding is to regulate the imagination and cause it to seek order within nature. Kant argued that the aesthetic judgement arose from an interaction between the faculties of understanding and imagination, which represent law and freedom respectively.¹⁸ These two faculties come into a harmonious rapport during aesthetic contemplation and it is this which is the basis of aesthetic experience. The function of the object of aesthetic contemplation is, therefore, to engender a mode of mental activity which unites freedom and law into a transcendent, liberating totality.¹⁹

Unlike the judgement of reason the aesthetic judgement is impressionistic and non-conceptual, it gives rise to feelings rather than knowledge, and is rich in connotations. Consequently, the object of aesthetic contemplation must also have the potential to stimulate a profusion of meanings in the mind of the perceiving subject, and Kant argued that this potential could be found most clearly in nature, which 'quickens' the interaction between the imagination and understanding.²⁰ This is the basis of Kant's concept of *naturschöne* or 'natural beauty' which had a central influence on Kracauer's ideas, and is most apparent in his claim that redemption could be realized through an engagement with 'physical reality'.

Kracauer argues that, through a scrutiny of the concrete, a form of

autonomous unstructured spectatorship can be attained. As with Kant this also involves a search for patterns of meaning, so that critical judgement is also called upon. Through this return to the concrete, the regulative power of the understanding, which has been diminished within mass culture, is restored, and the imagination and understanding are brought into a healthy rapport. For Kant, the contemplation of natural objects was the best source of aesthetic experience, and it is the unstaged, the found, the fortuitous, and that which is devoid of human intentionality which is prioritized in the idea of natural beauty.²¹ Similarly, for Kracauer, film has affinities with aspects of the concrete, natural world such as 'unstaged reality', 'chance', 'the fortuitous', 'the indeterminate', 'the flow of life' and 'endlessness'.²²

Another influence which Kracauer drew upon in developing his conception of reality was the phenomenology of Husserl, and, in particular, Husserl's conception of the *lebenswelt*.²³ Husserl argued that the objectifying abstract discourses of science obscured the more transient and subjective meanings generated within experience. It is this phenomenological world which constitutes the *lebenswelt*, and Husserl argued for a need to return to this world – 'the world in which we live intuitively, together with its real entities'²⁴ – not in order to surrender to its 'apparent incomprehensibility', but to examine its structure.²⁵

Kracauer's ideas were strongly influenced by the emphasis on the concrete and the transient within Husserl's phenomenology, and this led him to develop a theory of film in which the film image would preserve what he called the 'anonymous state of reality'.²⁶ Kracauer defined human reality in two ways. On the one hand, there were the systems of abstract conceptual reason which, although essential, had come to dominate modern life. On the other hand, there was the 'base' of life, consisting of the 'poignant' and 'precious' qualities of the objects of everyday experience; an experiential and psychological domain consisting of desires, needs, events and relationships. Kracauer referred to it as a 'multitude of interpenetrating and counterinfluencing objects and relationships', and as a 'complexity of satisfactions, discords, wants and pursuits which often lie below the conceptual and the conscious'.²⁷

Kracauer argued that film was a privileged medium, generated by the condition of the *lebenswelt* within modernity in order to 'redeem' the base of life for the modern subject. Such a redemption was possible because of the existence of structural correspondences or 'affinities' between the *lebenswelt*, with its transient and indeterminate structure, and the suggestive indeterminacy of the film image.²⁸ Underlying the empirical content of the film image are its 'basic principles and structures', just as, underlying the phenomenological surface of the *lebenswelt* are basic structures and principles; for Kracauer, the basic principles and affinities of film as

21 See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 84.

22 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, pp. 69–70.

23 See Allan Casebeer, *Film and Phenomenology: Towards a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 15.

24 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 156.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

26 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 69.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 299.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

a medium equate structurally with those underlying the *lebenswelt*. This is the basis of his realism.

The third major influence on Kracauer's conception of reality was the theory of the unconscious. Kracauer conceived the *lebenswelt* as a domain of experience in which repressed desire often emerged as symptoms. *From Caligari to Hitler*, in particular, is an attempt to decipher such repressed desire. In this book, Kracauer argues that films can embody psychological dispositions which 'extend below' the dimension of consciousness. However, because film cannot represent the unconscious as such, underlying psychological dispositions are made manifest as 'visible hieroglyphs' of the 'unseen dynamics of human relations'.²⁹

The analysis of the cinema in *From Caligari to Hitler* is premised upon the assumption that the German cinema embodies the 'inner life of the nation' and the 'German soul',³⁰ but Kracauer's preoccupation with national identity here is untypical, and a reflection of the widespread interest in the question of German national identity following World War II. Although Kracauer refers frequently to the nation in *From Caligari to Hitler*, a close reading of the book reveals that the 'inner psychological dispositions' which he refers to have nothing specifically national about them, but are rooted in the human condition itself. Inner life is thrown into turmoil by the sort of disruptive events which influence *all* individuals, and Kracauer argues that in such periods of radical disruption 'core underlying motifs' rise to the surface and become embedded in cultural artefacts such as films.³¹

Far from being a consideration of national identity, *From Caligari to Hitler* is a study of the ways in which alienating conditions create trauma within 'the base'. These events of 'turmoil' disrupt the operations of the *lebenswelt*, and reinforce abstraction and the systems of power which underlie abstraction.³² The main influences on Kracauer's conceptualization of the psychological content of the *lebenswelt* were Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and Erich Fromm's *Escape From Freedom*.³³ However, the influence of both Freud and Fromm on Kracauer was not as great as that of Husserl, and Kracauer argued that Husserl's model of the *lebenswelt* was superior to Freud's model of the unconscious because it dealt with both the conscious and the unconscious.

Kracauer's theory of film

Kracauer argued that an aesthetic medium must build from its basic 'properties', 'affinities' and 'appeals'. The basic property of film is its capacity for 'recording' and 'revealing' physical reality.³⁴ The basic affinity of film is, as previously mentioned, for representing

²⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: a Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975); Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976); Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1941).

³⁴ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 28.

35 Ibid., pp. 60–74.

36 Ibid., pp. 21–2.

37 Ibid., p. 298.

38 Ibid., p. 68.

39 Ibid., p. 69.

40 Ibid., p. 70.

41 Ibid., p. 71.

42 Ibid., p. 72.

43 Ibid., p. 31.

44 Ibid., p. 41.

aspects of reality such as 'the unstaged', 'the fortuitous', 'endlessness', 'the indeterminate' and 'the flow of life'.³⁵ The basic appeals of film are to notions of truth and authenticity concerned with 'the transient effects of things', and to notions of aesthetic beauty concerned with the perception of a multiplicity of meanings.³⁶

Because human experience is not 'synthesized', but fragmented, consisting of 'bits of chance events whose flow substitutes for meaningful continuity', Kracauer espouses an indeterminate cinema characterized by 'vague indefinability of meaning' and 'uninterpretable symbolism'.³⁷ Natural objects and events represented in films should, therefore, have a theoretically unlimited number of 'psychological correspondences' and should be surrounded by a 'fringe of meaning'.³⁸ Images on the screen should also reflect the 'indeterminacy of natural objects', providing 'raw material' with multiple meanings. Similarly, the film shot should 'delimit without defining', and preserve the 'essential neutrality' of reality.³⁹

Kracauer argued that the filmmaker has two obligations. The first is to give each scene in the film a dominant meaning relevant to the plot. The second is to retain the plurality of meanings within each scene so that 'a considerable degree of indeterminacy is retained'.⁴⁰ Such a mode of filmmaking would generate what Kracauer called 'free hovering images of reality'.⁴¹ Kracauer summed up his conception of an indeterminate cinema by recourse to the model of the 'flow of life', a term which he derived from Bergson and Husserl. Experience was a continuum, exemplified by the 'image of the street and the experience of the modern city', and film should express this.⁴²

It was this which led Kracauer to argue that the basic appeals of the cinema were to notions of truth and authenticity based on the transience of things and to notions of aesthetic quality based on the multiplicity of meanings. This, in turn, led him to support forms of avant-garde filmmaking based on an impressionistic style, and to praise films such as Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926), Joris Ivens's *Regen* (1929), and Jean Vigo's *A propos de Nice* (1930), films which form part of the 'city symphony' genre of the 1920s. These films conform closely to Kracauer's requirement to depict physical existence through types of representation which are 'cinematic'. Films such as *Regen* contain many such depictions, including the 'aftermath of a rain storm', the 'movements of clouds in the city', 'smoke effects' and 'other transient things'.⁴³ Kracauer argues that these are subjects which the medium of film appears 'predestined to exhibit'.⁴⁴

Kracauer focused on those avant-garde films with a documentary content when he argued that Cavalcanti's *En rade* (1926) and Vigo's *A propos de Nice* reveal otherwise hidden aspects of the urban environment. Kracauer expands on the idea that films can reveal hidden aspects of reality through a quotation from Germaine Dulac,

45 Ibid., p. 180. Quoting Dulac: 'Le Cinéma d'avant garde', in Marcel L'Herbier (ed.), *Intelligence du Cinématographe*, pp. 346–7.

46 Ibid., p. 301.

47 Ibid., p. 185.

48 Ibid., pp. 182–3.

49 Ibid., p. 256.

who argued that the 'subjects of pure cinema' could be found, for example in 'the trajectory of a bullet', or 'the formation of crystals'.⁴⁵ Although such aspects are hidden because they exist beyond the boundaries of perceptual activity, Kracauer includes them within the general category of objects which are 'hidden' because they are part of a world whose 'qualities and poignancies' are lost to the modern subject as it organizes its experience within a framework of abstract and functional rationality.

Kracauer criticized avant-garde films which he felt 'used' rather than represented reality, and argued that films which functioned in this way functioned ideologically. He also equated ideology with art, arguing that, because art emphasized the transformation of the world through the use of conventions and formulas, it 'covered reality', and the result was films which 'sustained the prevailing abstractness'.⁴⁶ Kracauer argued that this emasculated the avant garde, because films then functioned as 'elements of composition' which 'shut out nature in the raw'.⁴⁷

This led him to praise films such *Entr'acte* (René Clair, 1924), which retained significant traces of a relatively unmediated external reality, and lacked any 'recognizable principle or "message"'.⁴⁸

Kracauer's emphasis on the need for an impressionistic approach to the communication of meaning led him to argue that the 'episodic' film was of particular importance. In these films the narrative emerges from, and disappears back into, the 'flow of life'. The episodes in these films are 'permeable', in the sense that the story is constantly interrupted by shots of physical reality. Kracauer refers to Italian neorealist films such as *Paisa* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946), *La Strada* (Federico Fellini, 1954) and *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), and describes *I Vitelloni* (Federico Fellini, 1953) as 'composed of instants whose only *raison d'être* is their instantaneousness [and which] appear to be interlinked at random, without any logic or necessity'.⁴⁹ Kracauer also refers to French impressionist filmmakers such as Abel Gance and Marcel L'Herbier in this respect, and quotes Germaine Dulac approvingly as favouring the episodic film, and demanding an end to the hegemony of the story film. Kracauer's support for the French impressionist movement is qualified, however. Whilst praising the episodic quality of films such as Dulac's *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923), he rejects the romantic and expressive aesthetic which underlies the impressionist movement, and is particularly critical of one of the central tenets of impressionism: the concept of *photogenie*, which he believes implies an expressive transformation of reality.

Kracauer and surrealism

Kracauer rejected the notion that film was 'an art medium in the accepted sense', and, because of this, was both critical of French

impressionism, and more sympathetic towards surrealism. A number of links can be established between Kracauer and surrealism. French surrealism was well known to German artists and intellectuals. One of the basic tenets of surrealism, the notion that the film image could capture the unconscious, was a common feature of 1920s German film theory, appearing in the writings of Balazs, Kracauer and Benjamin, as well as in that of lesser known writers such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The publication of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1906 also stimulated debates in Germany, based on the premiss that, if the function of the dream was to satisfy repressed desire, then the same held true for the cinema. By the early 1920s, descriptions of the film as dream and the spectator as dreamer had become commonplace within German film criticism. Walter Benjamin's 1929 essay: 'Surrealism: the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia'⁵⁰ and his unfinished work on the Paris arcades, the *Passagenwerk*, were both strongly influenced by surrealism.⁵¹

Benjamin's interest in surrealism is well known, but what is less well known is that his approach to surrealism was significantly influenced by his reading of Kracauer's writings from the 1920s. His theory of the 'optical unconscious', for example, elaborated in the 1931 essay 'A small history of photography',⁵² as well as in the *Passagenwerk* and, in 1936, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction',⁵³ was derived from a 1927 article by Kracauer entitled 'Photography'.⁵⁴ Kracauer's concerns, particularly as expressed in *Theory of Film*, were actually closer to surrealism than were Benjamin's. During the late 1920s, and under the influence of Brecht, Benjamin criticized surrealism for being 'anarchistic', 'nihilistic' and 'undisciplined',⁵⁵ and also argued that the art work should contain organizing elements which would guide the spectator's interpretation. However, up to as late as 1960 in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer remained committed to the ideal of an indeterminate cinema capable of engendering self-determined associative and revelatory activity in the mind of the spectator.

It is partly because of this concern with indeterminacy that Kracauer is sensitive to surrealism, and considers films such as *La Coquille et le clergyman* (Germaine Dulac, 1928) and *L'Etoile de mer* (Man Ray, 1927), as well as René Clair's more Dadaist *Entr'acte*, to mark an important turn away from explorations of artistic form to investigations of unconscious and subconscious content. For Kracauer, the Buñuel/Dalí *Un Chien andalou* (1929) shows the 'erratic and the irrational', and refers to the 'play of varied impulses in deep psychological layers'.⁵⁶ Other surrealist filmmakers, such as Jean Cocteau and Hans Richter, are described as being concerned with the 'externalization of oblique emotional experiences', and with the representation of an inner reality which determines visible aspects of external phenomena.⁵⁷ Here Kracauer

⁵⁰ Benjamin, 'Surrealism: the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia', in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: New Left Books, 1979).

⁵¹ Susan Buck-Morss, 'Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*: redeeming mass culture for the revolution', *New German Critique*, no. 29 (1983), p. 212.

⁵² Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. Hannah Arendt (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1973).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), p. 208.

⁵⁵ Benjamin, 'Surrealism: the last snapshot', p. 237.

⁵⁶ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 187.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

argues that surrealism explores that part of the phenomenological base which consists of unconscious psychological desire, and is therefore ultimately concerned with the representation of external reality.

In company with the surrealists themselves, Kracauer argued that surrealism constituted an advance on previous avant-garde practices in marking a shift away from the formal aestheticism of movements such as *cinéma pur*. Kracauer is often vague when referring to *cinéma pur*, grouping together abstract films such as Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1924) with films more generally recognized as belonging to the *cinéma pur*, such as Henri Chomette's *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse* (1925), Germaine Dulac's *Thèmes et variations* (1928), and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Lichtspiel, schwarz-weiss-grau* (1930). What unites these films, according to Kracauer, is their emphasis on formalism. The distinctions between films such as *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse*, cubist machine-aesthetic films such as Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1925), and abstract films such as Hans Richter's *Rhythm 12* (1921–5), were less important to him than their common formalism, which, for Kracauer, amounted to ideology.

A number of conceptual correspondences exist between Kracauer's ideas and surrealism. The surrealist device of automatic writing, a technique designed to uncover the fragmentary, unconscious processes of thought, as opposed to the tendency towards totality implied by analytic thought,⁵⁸ is similar to Kracauer's ideas on the nature of filmic consumption, where the spectator 'writes' his or her dislocated meanings on the ambiguous film text in an impressionistic, evocative way.⁵⁹ Both Kracauer and the surrealists also referred to the 'dream-like state' which the film spectator experiences during the watching of a film.⁶⁰ The surrealist conception of the unconscious as a present, but unknown, realm of experience is also similar to Kracauer's notion of the 'base of life', which exists beyond conceptualization, within a phenomenological experience of reality. Closely related to this is the notion of rediscovering a world which is hidden and suppressed and, in both cases, this rediscovery takes the form of redeeming the world from abstraction through indeterminacy and the empirical.

One of the most important similarities between the ideas of Kracauer and those of the surrealists lies in the rejection of an aesthetic of expression and the adoption of an aesthetic of discovery, of finding meanings which exist at some level of conscious or unconscious reality. Although a rejection of traditional notions of art as expressive vision was common throughout the French and German avant garde at the time, both Kracauer and the surrealists combine that rejection with the adoption of a discourse of exploring, or deciphering, a hidden environment or terrain.

The metaphorical relationship of film to dreams, one of the key

⁵⁸ See Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: a Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 10–11.

⁵⁹ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 299.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

surrealist concerns with the cinema, also had a significant influence on Kracauer, as the following passage from *Theory of Film* indicates:

Once the spectator's organized self has surrendered, his subconscious or unconscious experiences, apprehensions and hopes tend to come out and take over. Owing to their indeterminacy, film shots are particularly fit to function as an ignition spark. Any such shot may touch off chain reactions in the moviegoer, a flight of associations which no longer revolve around their original source . . . films look most like dreams when they overwhelm us with the crude and unnegotiated presence of natural objects . . . there is something in the abrupt immediacy and shocking veracity of such images which justifies their identification as dream images.⁶¹

61 Ibid.

Kracauer's metaphor of the 'ignition spark' which activates chains of association in the spectator shares a number of similarities with the surrealist metaphor of 'the spark', which arises from the juxtaposition of contrasting images.⁶² Like Breton, who argued that the cause of the spark could be found in the unconscious, Kracauer also refers, in the above extract, to the ability of the indeterminate film image to stimulate chains of association emanating from the unconscious. Phrases such as the 'overwhelm[ing] presence of natural objects', 'abrupt immediacy' and 'shocking veracity' also testify to the fact that Kracauer frequently described film in terms which are similar to the intense experience of disorientation implied by surrealist devices such as *dépaysement*. Although the darker interests of surrealism – the concerns with death, sacrifice, sadism, and violent unconscious impulses – do not figure particularly prominently in the kind of spectatorial activity advocated by Kracauer in *Theory of Film*, they are still present there, and form the basic subject matter of *From Caligari to Hitler*.

62 Williams, *Figures of Desire*, p. 10.

Another similarity between Kracauer and surrealism is a shared concern for the concrete. One of the techniques practiced by the surrealists was that of taking an object from its functional context in order to observe the new associations which it gave rise to, and which emanated from the 'concrete density of the thing itself'.⁶³ This act of looking closely at an object, until the functional veils of ideology were pierced and the pure materiality of the object enabled structures of associatory meaning to emerge, is similar to Kracauer's appropriation of the concept of *naturschöne*, as well as general concern with the need to return to the concrete.

63 Ibid., p. 12.

Distinctions must also be made between Kracauer's ideas, German film theory in general, and surrealism. Kracauer's notion of the base must be distinguished from the various conceptions of the unconscious held within surrealism. As mentioned previously, Kracauer argued that the Freudian theory of the unconscious was inferior to Husserl's notion of the *lebenswelt*, and that films which

64 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 191.

65 Benjamin, 'Photography', p. 243.

represented the *lebenswelt* were 'cinematic', whilst those which represented the unconscious were 'merely surrealist'.⁶⁴ Benjamin also took up this distinction, arguing that the 'optical unconscious' which revealed the phenomenological world of barely perceptible instances must be distinguished from the 'instinctual unconscious' which psychoanalysis revealed.⁶⁵

The degree of emotional intensity which surrealism wished to evoke in the spectator is also different from the kind of contemplative experience which Kracauer, following Kant, frequently wishes to evoke in the spectator. Rather than Breton's 'shock to the eye', Kracauer emphasized a degree of textual ambivalence which promoted an exploratory activity within the spectator. However, Kracauer's use of the Kantian sublime, as well as *naturischöne*, means that this distinction over the intensity of the spectatorial experience is not clear cut. There is also a certain relationship between Kracauer's concern for the disinterested perusal implied by *naturischöne*, and the kind of 'flâneur' activity represented by Breton and Aragon in *Nadja* and *Le Paysan de Paris*. Here, although it is the new nature of the city, rather than of nature itself, which is the focus of attention, there is a common concern with immersion in a constantly changing, potentially enchanted environment, which is similar to Kracauer's conception of physical reality.

Kracauer's focus on naturalistic continuity also differed from the estrangement devices employed by the surrealists, although a distinction can be made between the use of realistic imagery in surrealism and the more deconstructive devices employed by avant-garde movements such as Dada. Although visual estrangement devices were advocated within surrealism in order to destabilize the spectator, surrealist films still retained a greater mimetic content than the more deconstructionist films associated with Dada.⁶⁶ Surrealist estrangement was based upon the juxtaposition of realistic images and 'surreality' emerged from this conjunction, rather than from the inherent strangeness of each individual representation.

Because Kracauer argued that the film image should be indeterminate and semi-autonomous, he was opposed to the anchoring of cinematic signifiers to specific psychoanalytic concepts, arguing that such an approach was 'excessively prescriptive' and that film, as a medium, could not accommodate such symbolism.⁶⁷ In Kantian terms, such symbolism also contradicted the proper relationship between the understanding and imagination because, in this case, the understanding dominated the imagination. Discussing *Un Chien andalou* he argued that

One familiar example is the fascinating and truly realistic shot of a small street crowd seen from far above in *Un Chien andalou*. If this shot were integrated into contexts suggestive of camera-reality and the flow of life it would invite us dreamily to probe into its

66 Schlüppmann, 'Phenomenology of film', p. 112.

67 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 191.

indeterminate meanings. Yet actually we are not permitted to absorb it, for the symbolic function assigned to surrealism automatically prevents them from unfolding their inherent potentialities.⁶⁸

It is worth exploring how Kracauer interprets this scene in *Un Chien andalou*, by comparing it to scenes from a film Kracauer commends, Ivens's *Regen*. *Regen* explores the impact and aftermath of a rain storm in the city. It is filmed in the new realist style of the late 1920s, but is also influenced by the impressionist style of painters such as Monet. It is primarily concerned with visual effects, such as the changing conditions of light, reflections seen through rain-soaked windows, and abstract patterns picked out from the fabric of city life and presented to the spectator in order to be observed and contemplated. The film is impressionistic and episodic, and its symbolic content is centred on the evocation of a visual and poetic experience of the city. Although an aesthetically beautiful film, *Regen* is beautiful in the spirit of *naturischöne* rather than of the composed art work, and conforms to Kracauer's belief that the truly 'permeable' episodic film must be loosely composed.

In *Un Chien andalou*, the scene Kracauer refers to occurs near the beginning of the film, where a man and woman are seen looking down through the window of an apartment at a small crowd which has gathered around a young woman who is prodding a severed hand lying in the road. A policeman arrives and places the hand in a box, then gives it to the woman. We then see a shot, taken from above, of the woman surrounded by the crowd, then a further shot of the couple looking down at the scene from the window of their apartment. As the two continue to gaze in fascination at the woman in the street she is run down by a passing car.

Kracauer argues that the scene is not suggestive of the flow of life because, unlike in a permeable episodic scene, the action does not cut from the activities and desires of the characters portrayed to show images of the environment around them. The characters appear to exist within a hermetically sealed subjective world, which is given a sense of extreme self-enclosure influenced by the circumscribed intensity of the dream. This means that, for Kracauer, their social character is inadequately portrayed. Unlike *Regen*, with its lateral, paradigmatic narrative structure, the narrative within this scene is linear and, for Kracauer, too composed and ideological. The continuity editing employed also conveys a sense that the scene is observed from the point of view of the couple in the apartment. *Regen*, on the other hand, dispenses with such an organizing viewpoint, and employs editing to build up an assemblage of impressions seen from a variety of viewpoints.

Kracauer argues that the scene where the young woman is given the severed hand and appears to enter a trance-like state, clutching

the box with the hand in to her breast, is potentially rich in significance. However, the spectator is prevented from exploring the inherent potentialities of the indeterminate meanings which could arise from the scene because, in the first place, the characters and events depicted are too disconnected from their immediate physical environment (and this limits the degree of exploration which can occur) and, in the second place, because the extent and opacity of the symbolism involved obstructs the development of free, self-directed interpretative activity on the part of the spectator. In effect, the symbolism in the scene is such that the link between the hand, the woman, and her adoption of a trance like state is only interpretable by reference to specific psychoanalytical concepts – such as that of fetishism – and the problem for Kracauer is that such a concept is already embedded within a pre-existing theoretical discourse. As a consequence, the spectator becomes a subject of the discourse rather than a free creator of meanings.

For Kracauer, the over-determined symbolic function of the image in films such as *Un Chien andalou* restricts the image's potential indeterminacy, and imposes a 'strained meaningfulness' on it.⁶⁹ He also regarded such symbolism as an essentially literary, as opposed to cinematic, mode of expression. His opposition to such symbolism was also conditioned by his attitude towards ideology, as is made clear when he argues that art in which the 'imagery exhausts itself in projecting its creator's ideas uses the image for a utilitarian purpose'.⁷⁰ Directive symbolism is here equated with prescriptive authoritarianism, and, beyond this, the 'literary' itself is equated with the realm of ideology, because language is saturated with the coercive imperatives of modernity.

Kracauer argued that film is an essentially *literal* rather than *literary* mode of aesthetic representation. Discussing Cocteau's *Death of a Poet* (1930) he criticizes Cocteau (a '*littérateur* rather than a *filmier*') for his interpretation of the scene in the film where a wound-like mouth appears in the hand of the poet. Cocteau explains that 'the mouth of one of his creations lives in his hand like a wound', but Kracauer argues that, in the film, the image principally signifies a real hand with a real mouth-like wound. The image may be inexplicable, but does not possess poetic or symbolic qualities. Kracauer does not argue that the film image *only* possesses a literal, as opposed to a symbolic, function but that, in general, the literal function overwhelms the symbolic function in film, making film an unsuitable vehicle for surrealism.

Neither does Kracauer argue that surrealism as such intentionally demands fixed symbolic relationships between image and psychoanalytic signification, and he is aware that surrealist theory emphasized the role of the art work in stimulating the spectator into engaging in activity. He was also aware of the debate between Antonin Artaud and Germaine Dulac over *La Coquille et le*

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 191.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

71 Sandy Flitterman-Lewis 'The image and the spark: Dulac and Artaud reviewed', in Rudolf Kuenzli, (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film* (New York: Willis Locker and Owens, 1987), p. 112.

clergyman, in which Artaud criticized Dulac for connecting the imagery in the film to specific conceptual meanings. According to Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, for Artaud, meaning was 'the result of productive relations between images themselves, and between text and viewer . . . [and] any attempt . . . to clarify the meaning of the images . . . was seen as a distortion of the original and direct impulse of the images'.⁷¹ However, although Kracauer was aware that surrealists such as Artaud and Breton advocated, in his own words, 'indeterminate' as opposed to 'symbolic' signification, he believed that the spectator inevitably interpreted the image as a psychoanalytic symbol because of the relationship between surrealism and psychoanalysis.

Focusing on the essence of what he calls surrealistic activity, which he defines as associative thought, Kracauer argued that surrealism is best envisaged as a field of activity within the mind of the spectator. Cinematic images do not illustrate concepts. Instead, the 'cinematic symbol' (as opposed to the literary symbol) is principally an image of an object in relationship with other objects, displaying all the physical complexities and particularities of those objects. As the spectator scrutinized the image, chains of associative thought were produced. Along with the revelation of the visible world which followed such scrutiny, what Kracauer calls an 'outgrowth' of relations between the image and the *lebenswelt* of the spectator occurred as the spectator made connections between the image and her/his own experience. This led Kracauer to define the proper role of surrealism in the cinema as that of providing the potential and framework for the spectator to explore that area of the



Le Coquille et le clergyman.
Picture courtesy: BFI Sills;
Light Cone, Paris.

72 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 191.

lebenswelt which consisted of psychological, unconscious desire, and he agreed with René Clair that 'film nevertheless remains a field of incomparable surrealistic activity for the mind of the spectator'.⁷²

Along with a concern with indeterminacy, Kracauer also shares with Artaud a desire to return to the 'concrete density of things.' In 'Cinema and reality', Artaud uses language and ideas which seem indistinguishable from those used by Kracauer in his 1927 'Photography' essay, as well as in *Theory of Film*. Artaud states that:

The human skin of things, the epidermis of reality: this is the primary raw material of reality. Cinema exalts matter and reveals it to us in its profound spirituality . . . out of this pure play of appearances, out of this, so to speak, transubstantiation of elements is born an inorganic language which moves the mind . . . and because it works with matter itself, cinema creates situations which arise from the mere collision of objects, forms, repulsions, attractions. It does not detach itself from life but discovers the original order of things.⁷³

73 Antonin Artaud, 'Cinema and reality' (1927), in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism 1929–1929*, Volume I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 412.

In a later paper from 1933, 'The premature old age of the cinema', Artaud continued to advocate an indeterminate and realistic aesthetic, arguing that dramatic cinema – in which compositional principles guide the spectator – suppresses the elements of chance and the unforeseen, which are fundamental to cinema. Artaud describes documentary cinema as the 'last refuge of the partisans of cinema at any cost', where the 'poetry of things' is able to emerge and, like Kracauer, he argues that the camera lens can present the world to the spectator, conjuring up 'shreds of appearances'.⁷⁴ However, and in distinction to the position adopted in 'Cinema and reality', Artaud is also more sceptical than Kracauer of film's ability to connect these visible shreds of appearance 'to that which is concealed beneath things . . . [that which] . . . swarms in the lower depths of the mind'. For Artaud, the fact that cinema remains on the epidermis of life is also a problem, and because of this he argues that 'it is not to the cinema that we must look to restore the myths of man and the life of today'.⁷⁵ Artaud's scepticism here arises from his attitude towards the sound film, which he regards as 'arresting the unconscious and spontaneous poetry of images'.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, he still holds out the possibility, earlier posed in relation to the silent film, that films could both create a 'melody amongst objects' and connect that melody to psychological existence. For Artaud, it is the image in the mind of the spectator, an image of a poeticized world, which must emerge from cinema's otherwise 'stratified and frozen conquest of reality'.⁷⁷

74 Antonin Artaud, 'The premature old age of cinema', in Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism 1929–1929*, Volume II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 122.

75 Ibid., p. 125.

76 Ibid., p. 124.

77 Ibid.

Conclusions

Many studies of surrealism have concentrated on the use of anti-realist devices such as *dépaysement* and automatic writing, whilst

fewer studies have been made of the function of realism within surrealism. Such studies are particularly pertinent in relation to surrealist film because, as Artaud acknowledges, the film is an essentially realistic aesthetic medium. Kracauer's emphasis on realism emerges from the German critique of modernity and instrumental rationality, in which a return to the 'epidermis of reality' is seen as the way to redeem the modern subject. But what are the roots of realism within the French surrealist cinema?

To some extent the source of the mimetic content within surrealist art can be attributed to the desire to render the dream image vividly. However, this does not entirely explain the prevalence of realistic imagery within surrealist art, and particularly within the surrealist cinema. Another influence may have been the French determinist and naturalist intellectual tradition, which was particularly strong in French film culture. Filmmakers such as Clair, Vigo and Cavalcanti were all associated, in one way or another, with the naturalist movement. Cavalcanti is particularly interesting in this respect, because he was associated with both the surrealist movement and the British documentary film movement, and because, in 1936, he developed an approach to cinema which he defined as 'neorealist', which consisted of a synthesis of documentary naturalism and surrealism.

The naturalist tradition in France emerged from a tradition of determinist thought which went back to the eighteenth century, and included philosophers such as Condorcet and Helvetius, as well as writers such as Balzac, Flaubert and Zola. Surrealism's concern for the determining power of sexuality and the unconscious is, in many respects, comparable to the emphasis placed on the determining power of the subconscious genetic inheritance within naturalism. The naturalist tradition also influenced the French cinema from its inception. The first film adaptation of Zola appeared in 1903, and the tradition continued to influence French cinema through the 1920s and up to the appearance of Renoir's *La Bête humaine* in 1938. Naturalism constituted a strand within French cinema which both paralleled and interacted with modernist cinematic movements such as impressionism and surrealism.

The naturalist influence is particularly strong in the films of the most important surrealist filmmaker, Luis Buñuel, a Spaniard who, like Zola and Balzac, had studied natural history and entomology. Buñuel's films contain many of the same themes and characteristics as Zola's novels: there are similar concerns over the effects of location and environment on human suffering and degeneracy, and a similar engagement with issues such as temptation, desire, violent sexuality, bourgeois degeneracy and cruelty. Buñuel's films after *Un Chien andalou* are also characterized by a greater concern for naturalistic realism: *L'Age d'or* (1930) is considerably more 'realistic and everyday' than its predecessor,⁷⁸ and there is a significant

78 Francisco Aranda, *Luis Buñuel: a Critical Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), p. 82.

naturalist content in *Las Hurdes* (1932), *Los Olvidados* (1950), *Nazarin* (1958), *Viridiana* (1961) and *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1963). Buñuel's films after 1970, such as *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972), show less of an interest in naturalist content, but still retain an emphasis on the determined human situation.

Buñuel's films contain a combination of documentary realism, tragic humanism and surrealism. This combination of naturalism, surrealism and humanism was admired by the French critic André Bazin who, like Buñuel, had also studied natural history and entomology, and who, like Kracauer, had been influenced by phenomenology (that of Bergson, rather than Husserl). Some recent critical writings on surrealism have focused on the way in which the films and ideas of the movement can inform contemporary film theory, particularly feminist film theory. However, I want to argue here that it is also within a paradigm constituted by surrealism, naturalism and phenomenology, the ideas of Kracauer, Bazin and Artaud, and the films of Buñuel, Cavalcanti and others, that a potentially significant new surrealist film theory and practice can be defined. The best intellectual source for the development of such a theory and practice remains, in my view, the work of Kracauer.

Screen as threshold: the disorientating topographies of surrealist film

WENDY EVERETT

Film was seen by the surrealists as the ideal medium for the expression and exploration of surrealist concerns. The only truly modern art form, it was unhampered by tradition; its immediacy and emotive power offered fertile ground for the surrealist metaphor; its condemnation by the establishment as immoral and corrupting clearly enhanced its potential for social revolt and the expression of sexual fantasy; its perceived similarities to the state of dreaming seemed ready-made for the surrealists' own exploration of dreams and subconscious desires. Such ideas underpin surrealist theory and practice with regard to film. They are also, perhaps, at the basis of the conviction that the cinema itself is *inherently* surrealist.

The central importance of this notion should be recognized, since it cuts across much of the confusion surrounding the nature of surrealist film, particularly the tendency to confuse 'surrealist' with what is merely fantastic or bizarre. To some extent this elastic use of the term 'surrealist' results from the disconcerting disparity between the group's unreserved enthusiasm for cinema as the ideal vehicle for surrealism, and the small number of films which they actually produced. This is often cited as proof of the failure of cinema, or surrealism, or both, to fulfil their initial promise. However, the close association between cinema and surrealism remains fundamental, and there are, for example, very few European directors who have not at some point acknowledged their personal debt to the movement. Moreover, it is clear that the surrealists' remarkably perceptive and

1 Examples include poems and scenarios by Louis Aragon, Antonin Artaud, André Breton, Robert Desnos, Benjamin Péret and Philippe Soupault, and these were a frequent feature of reviews in publications such as *Nord-Sud*, *Le Film* and *Littérature*. Some idea of the range and number of such publications can be found in Ado Kyrou, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (Paris: Le Terrain vague, 1963), pp. 53–9; M. Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965), pp. 65–95; and in collections of texts such as Alain and Odette Virmaux, *Les Surréalistes et le cinéma* (Paris: Seghers, 1976). Poems and novels alike attempt to recreate the special effects of film, or make direct reference to films and film stars. One of the most striking examples of cinematic influence on writing is a novel which can be seen as nothing less than a collage of film: Louis Aragon, *Anicet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1921). For a study of this aspect of the book, see Wendy Everett, 'Anicet and the "boîte de prestidigitation"', *Quinquarème, New Studies in Modern Literature*, no. 1 (1977).

2 The surrealists were amongst the first people to take cinema seriously, and this is shown by the number and range of their articles of film criticism, a genre they might almost be said to have invented. Dealing with the latest releases, and studying a wide range of critical themes, such articles appeared regularly from 1919 onwards. Desnos, for example, published some forty-five film articles between 1923 and 1930, in popular publications such as *Paris Journal*, *Journal Littéraire* and *Le Soir*. The idea of criticism as parallel reading, the surrealists' *critique synthétique*, is illustrated in articles such as Philippe Soupault's 'Charlot Voyage (The Immigrant, 1919)', where the description of the events experienced by Chaplin on his voyage to America uses the first person plural *nous* pronoun, thus including both critic and readers within the filmic diegesis: *Littérature*, vol. 4 (1919), p. 20.

sophisticated understanding of the nature of film anticipates many of this century's most significant critical theories.

If, for example, it is the surrealists' energetic enthusiasm for the cinema which surfaces so repeatedly in their poems, novels, paintings and scenarios,¹ a more considered response is to be found in their critical articles where they explore ways in which the realistic images of film can be simultaneously strengthened and subverted through editing to create the multi-layered realities of surrealism. Often these critical articles take the form of parallel readings of individual films, clearly reflecting the surrealists' belief in the essentially creative role of the spectator in negotiating the film's meanings.²

It is this astoundingly far-sighted awareness of the medium rather than the so-called dearth of surrealist films which interests me; and it is not my intention to provide either a list of films which merit the surrealist classification, or the definitions which might be used to establish such a list. Nor am I concerned to impose on surrealist films a single theoretical viewpoint. Any one of these activities implies a stasis which has a limited significance within the essential mobility of the surrealist process. Instead, I propose a journey through the disorientating topographies of surrealist film; a journey whose constant movement and shifting focus and viewpoint will reflect those of the films in question and indeed of surrealism itself. Of course, the brevity of the trip inevitably means that many of the most important landmarks and most haunting corners of the surrealist landscape will remain unvisited. But my purpose is to consider film's unique position as both ideal vehicle or means of transporting us into the passionate adventure that is surrealism and, at the same time, privileged creator of the very landscapes we discover on that journey: cinema as movement and locus within the process of surrealism.

Since cinema, like surrealism itself, is a predominantly visual medium, it is natural for the journey to begin with the eye or, more precisely, with the two eyes of the spectator: an eye (the organ of sight) and an I (personal identity; the seer). Both eye and I may be closed or open, dreaming or awake, looking out or looking in, but on this journey they must look afresh, must see in a new way, and this, clearly, is one of the messages of the opening sequence of *Un Chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929), whose image of a slashed eye, now widely recognized as one of the icons of surrealism, provides our point of departure.

The sequence begins, in true narrative style, with the intertitle: 'Il était une fois ...' ('Once upon a time ...'), and we settle down for the story. We see, in closeup, a man sharpening a razor, and as he steps out onto the balcony the film alternates third-person shots of him, looking upwards, with shots which appear to show his point-of-view of the dark sky where a narrow wisp of cloud is moving

3 'The eye in the cinema is the perfect eye, the steady and ubiquitous control of the screen passed from director to spectator by virtue of the cinematic apparatus'. See Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 32.

4 A comparison may be made with the appearing and disappearing bandage on the woman's finger in the mirror sequence in *L'Age d'or*, to which I refer later. It is also important to relate this subverting of temporal structure to that which, through non-sequential, even contradictory use of intertitles, subverts the entire narrative structure of *Un Chien andalou*.

5 The complexity of issues of metaphor, figure and metonymy are fundamental to any consideration of the language of film, and accordingly have received considerable theoretical attention. See, for example, Christian Metz, 'Metaphor and metonymy: a dissymmetrical symmetry', in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: the Imaginary Signifier*, trans Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzi (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 197–206.

towards the moon. We then cut to a closeup of a young woman's face as the man moves his razor towards her open eye and then, menacingly, to a shot of the cloud now actually crossing the surface of the moon. In the final devastating closeup we watch as the razor slices the eye and its contents spill out.

The sequence is extremely brief and, expressed in words, appears fairly benign. However, on the screen its impact is unbearable, unforgettable. Outward and inward vision violently collide in this intensely horrifying image of the destruction of sight, and of cinema's own 'perfect eye'.³ And so it seems that the journey of eye into, or through, the screen must culminate in absolute destruction. However, this sequence cannot constitute an ending; no stasis, no conclusion is possible, because the narrative does not accord the eye any status. It has no identity, no *raison d'être*; it is simply there, and the 'story' quickly moves on.

Nevertheless, the eye demands our complicity, and we try to understand. Are we dealing here with filmic realism? Perhaps this is a form of prologue somewhat akin to the scorpion sequence that opens *L'Age d'or* (Luis Buñuel, 1930)? Is this a form of cine reportage, possibly the recording of an 'everyday' operation (the type of video footage which appears to be so popular in Britain today)? The sequence is brutal enough, and the information conveyed to us as the eye is slit is detailed and factually correct; thus would an eye appear if sliced by a sharp razor. But if it is 'real', what then is its diegetic function? That the eye is part of a narrative has been clearly signalled by the film's fairy-tale start: 'Once upon a time . . .'. Yet the woman whose eye has been mutilated reappears onscreen seconds later. She has not been blinded; indeed, both her eyes are open and undamaged. So where then are we to situate this sequence?

Indeed, how far can we describe this image as real? The 'woman's' eye is of course not actually the woman's eye. It is only through editing, the temporal and spatial positioning of this particular image in relation to others, that we accept the eye as hers. But careful attention to this apparently realistic and coherent sequence will, in any case, undermine any narrative realism; for just as the film's narrative will ultimately fail to contain it (the woman appears later with her eyes intact, the man who slices her eye in the prologue – Buñuel himself – does not seem to play any further role in the diegesis), so too the temporal structure which is created by editing is simultaneously subverted by that editing. The man holding the razor loses his watch and somehow acquires a striped tie, for example, during the course of what we are otherwise inclined to read as a continuous sequence.⁴ And so the *real* of the story is simultaneously the *not-real* of the story.

Are we perhaps dealing with filmic metaphor or metonymy? It is tempting to explore this notion briefly.⁵ We might read the sequence as 'the razor slices the eye as the cloud slices the moon' (or vice

6 It is interesting to compare this presentation of the real world in terms of the two-dimensional fictional space of film in conjunction, for example, with a scene in *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984), when one of the characters gazes along a deserted railway track whose lines, appearing to meet at a point through the screen, may be read as a trope for the illusory nature of filmic depth, and insists that there is nothing there, that the illusion is indeed illusion. See S. Jones, 'Wenders' *Paris, Texas* and the American way of seeing', in Wendy Everett (ed.), *European Identity in Cinema* (Oxford: Intellect, 1996), p. 48.

7 Lautréamont, 'Chant sixième', *Les Chants de Maldoror* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1963).

8 Reverdy, in *Nord-Sud*, no. 13 (1918).

9 Quoted in Raymond Durnat, *Luis Buñuel* (London: Studio Vista, 1967), p. 23.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

11 'Buñuel commits a violent transgression against our desire to protect our privacy. With seeming impunity [he] forces upon the spectator a visual rape.' A. Thiher, *The Cinematic Muse: Critical Studies in the History of the French Cinema* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 27.

versa). Clearly, this reading is doomed: the cloud does not slice through the moon, but only seems to do so; in fact it passes harmlessly in front of it, and by a comfortable margin. The depth and vast distances of our cosmology are distorted, flattened by the two-dimensional space of the screen. The cloud slicing the moon, we must recognize as an illusion; whilst it may look as though it does, we know this is not possible (it would in any case evaporate, cease to exist).⁶ Are we then being made to see that if the cloud appears to slice the moon (but does not) similarly the knife appears to slice the eye (but does not)? Is this sequence a disquisition on the very nature of film language? The trouble is that the razor does slice through the eye: we watch as the eye bursts open under its blade; we see the vitreous humour spilling out.

Might this therefore be a surrealist metaphor of the exploding variety, the bringing together of distant realities: Lautréamont's umbrella and sewing machine?⁷ The clash of opposites, of conflicting worlds: Reverdy's 'rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées'?⁸ Is the physical *choc* it produces in the spectator the prerequisite of surrealism's *merveilleux*? Or might the sequence present an alternative version of Breton's inspirational 'Il y a un homme coupé en deux par la fenêtre' ('There is a man cut in half by the window')? Razor as window or threshold, cutting across an image of sight, slicing through the inner/outer dichotomy, preparing us for the film as exploration of the semiotics of dream?

This last idea suggests various Freudian readings, based on the film's repeated devices of condensation and displacement, its portrayal of latent desire. In such terms, we might consider this sequence as symbol of intercourse, rape or castration. While such an approach appears to be justified by, for example, Buñuel's comment that the only possible explanation of *Un Chien andalou* would be a psychological one,⁹ it is important to bear in mind Breton's repeated warnings about single and exclusive interpretations which inevitably limit the generation of meanings essential to the surrealist process: surrealist art is movement not stasis, hence the unease created by Raymond Durnat's pronouncement that razor blade and eye are clear symbols of 'the male and female organ', for instance.¹⁰ And, in any case, such a reading merely returns us to our original questions: 'whose eye?' and 'what is the relationship of this sequence to the film's story?' becomes 'whose rape?' and 'what is its relationship to the story?'

The seen eye is experienced as the viewer's eye, so are we ourselves being raped?¹¹ Visually assaulted by Buñuel (for, remember, he is responsible for the cutting in all senses)? Forced, as it were, to open our eyes by closing them, to escape our natural passivity. The slashed eye then becomes a self-conscious, self-generating trope for the whole film, which perfectly fulfils Antonin Artaud's desire for 'a film with purely visual sensations, the dramatic

12 Artaud, on *Le Coquille et le clergyman*, in *Cinéma et réalité*, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume III (Paris: Gallimard, 1956-), p. 20 (my translation).

13 See Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, pp. 44 ff.

14 Desnos brings together the notions of film and dream in looking at the cinema as the setting for 'l'aventure moderne'. See Robert Desnos, *Journal Littéraire*, 25 April 1925, reproduced in Desnos, *Cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 139.

15 'Le cinéma dispense aux surréalistes l'aventure absolue qu'ils ont cherché passionnément dans la vie quotidienne ...'. See André Breton, 'Comme dans un bois', in *L'Âge du cinéma*, nos. 4-5 (1951); quoted in R. Gardies, 'Le cinéma est-il surréaliste?', *Europe*, nos. 475-6 (1968), pp. 146-7.

16 See a series of interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet, in A.N. Fragola and C. Smith Roch, *The Erotic Dream Machine* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), p. 106.

17 In my treatment of this theme I am indebted to Mary Ann Caws, 'About thresholds', in *The Eye in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

force of which springs from a shock on the eyes, drawn, one might say, from the very substance of the eye ...'.¹²

And all the time, behind it all, lurks our uncomfortable awareness that what we are seeing does not in any case exist: images on the screen are mere traces of traces; illusions of a world whose spatial and temporal dimensions exist only as marks on a narrow strip of celluloid, which itself can be contained in a flat tin – nothing.¹³ So the sequence perhaps reminds us that film must alter our personal definitions of reality by forcing us to accept as real what we are simultaneously forced to see as unreal, and vice versa. Carrying us, in other words, to the very heart of Breton's definitions of surrealism, and returning us to the surrealists' fascinating conviction that film itself is inherently surrealist.

And even as we wrestle mentally with the proliferating ambiguities of the sequence, we are physically assaulted by its immediacy and its violence. The screen towards which we have voyeuristically turned our eyes in the expectation of pleasure, titillation or escape has turned its gaze back on us. As eye recognizes eye, the barrier between self and other, between internal and external viewpoints, and inner and outer realities is destroyed, and with it all our certainties. Like a surrealist poem, film itself is flux or movement, and any exploration of it must therefore remain entirely open-ended. Once started there can be no stopping for definition or certainty; all possibilities coexist simultaneously and the surreal landscape will remain uncharted.

The meeting point between vision and enunciation, between spectator's gaze and film's gaze, is the screen which, within the oneiric darkness of the cinema (what Robert Desnos describes as 'La nuit parfaite du cinéma ...')¹⁴ ceases to be perceived as a flat white surface on which images are projected, and becomes instead an opening or threshold through which both eye and I must journey in their quest for surrealism's *aventure absolue*.¹⁵ Hence, no doubt, Breton's fascination with a single phrase in *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922): 'Passé le pont les fantômes vinrent à sa rencontre' ('On the other side of the bridge, the ghosts came to meet him'); film as bridge connecting our reality with that of the film. Alain Robbe-Grillet echoes this idea in his claim that the subject of his film, *La Belle captive* (1983), is to 'go through'. For him the moment of connection between the diverse realities is visualized as a lock in a canal, 'When you open the locks, a sudden flow invades completely by the simple fact that an object from another world has entered into this world', and he links this directly with surrealism, as the point where insoluble contradictions cease to be contradictory.¹⁶ The idea of text (whether poem, painting or film) as threshold or passageway is central to surrealism,¹⁷ emerging, for example in the covered passages of Paris along which Aragon wanders in *Le Paysan de Paris*, in search of the unexpected and the marvellous; in Reverdy's

fil conducteur along which distant realities meet and the surrealist spark is released; in Breton's discovery of 'un tissu capillaire assurant l'échange constant . . . entre le monde extérieur et le monde intérieur . . .' ('a capillary tissue providing a constant exchange . . . between external and internal worlds') explored in *Les Vases communicants*; even in their games where *L'un dans l'autre* provides perhaps the most striking example of the fusion of different objects and images, but even *Le Cadavre exquis* gives an instance of their meeting and metamorphosis in a process whose progression from segment to segment must inevitably recall that of film.

In all such examples we are struck by the coincidence of process and form; for surrealism is inevitably self-aware. Surrealist paintings frequently figure their role as threshold as their own subject matter: as window or door for example, as passage way between internal and external realities. As we saw with Buñuel's eye, this movement between gazes, via the threshold, is constant, and must be constantly maintained in both directions. There can be no mere passengers on the surrealist journey; the spectator's role is as creative as that of the author. If Aragon includes a reproduction of Matisse's *La Porte-fenêtre* (1914) in his autobiographical *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire ou les incipit*, it is because for him it is 'le plus mystérieux des tableaux jamais peints' ('the most mysterious of all paintings'),¹⁸ an opening into another world which, in its refusal to depict anything, functions as an opening into his own imagination.¹⁹ Buñuel shows a similar understanding of film when he claims that 'it would suffice for the white pupil of the cinema screen to reflect the light which is proper to it, to blow up the universe',²⁰ and it is interesting to consider the little box which the oriental client brings with him to the brothel in *Belle de Jour* (1967) in the light of this comment. Although the man shows the prostitutes what is in the box (something which seems to horrify all of them except Séverine) we, the spectators, are not allowed to see. According to Buñuel, he was constantly being asked what the box contained, to which he would reply: 'Whatever you want to be there'.²¹ But of course, the need for creative reading is not always understood, and it is perhaps salutary to contrast Aragon's response to Matisse's painting with that of the authors of *Post-Impressionism: the Rise of Modern Art* who, reproducing the painting with its English title *Open Window at Collioure*, comment that whereas Matisse often painted the view from his window, 'Here, however, the view has been painted over in black and is *lost* to us'.²²

Magritte surely makes it impossible for any glance to remain passively on the surface of the canvas, by plunging the eye into a world in which no distinctions can be established between objectivity and subjectivity, outward and inner viewpoints, reality and illusion. In *On the Threshold of Liberty* (1929), solid walls are replaced by walls which are simultaneously inside and outside, painting and view.

18 Louis Aragon, *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire ou les incipit* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1969), pp. 80–81.

19 Robbe-Grillet too talks of the 'passages' to be found in Magritte's paintings, in Fragola and Roch, *The Erotic Dream Machine*, p. 106.

20 Luis Buñuel (1953), quoted in Francisco Aranda, *Luis Buñuel: a Critical Biography*, trans David Robinson (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), p. 273.

21 Luis Buñuel *My Last Breath*, trans Abigail Israel (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1985), p. 243.

22 T. Parsons and I. Gale, *Post-Modernism: the Rise of Modern Art, 1880–1920* (London: Studio Editions, 1994). (Italics mine.)

- ²³ So many of Magritte's paintings deal with reality as blending of internal and external vision that I cannot do justice to them here. But I should like to refer to a few in particular: *La Clef des champs* (1933), with its clear reference to Breton, *L'Appel des cimes* (1942), and *La Condition humaine* (1933 and 1935) all present pictures within a picture, in which different levels of reality overlap; *Le Mois des vendanges* (1959) where our outward view through an open window is obscured by a group of bowler-hatted men staring in through the window at us; and various versions of *L'Empire des lumières* (1954) where the 'opposites' of day and night, light and dark, coexist disturbingly.
- ²⁴ J. Gratten, 'Runaway: textual dynamics in the surrealist poetry of André Breton', in I. Huggins (ed.), *Surrealism and Language* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), p. 40.
- ²⁵ It is interesting to compare this with Robbe-Grillet's ludic treatment of continuity in *Trans-Europ-Express* (1966), in a scene where the director, scriptwriter and producer struggle to decide whether or not Elias, the main character, is still carrying a parcel containing his possessions. He, of course, refuses to obey their instructions, and as they decide he is still carrying it, throws the parcel into the sea. Again and again and again.
- ²⁶ This merging of reality and imagination is a fundamental characteristic of personal memory, and as such may be seen as one of the defining characteristics of autobiographical film. One example occurs in Terence Davies's *The Long Day Closes* (1992), in a scene which shows the boy, Bud, sitting in his classroom, dreaming of a galleon. As the light fades out the rest of the class we see the scene that he is imagining: a fully-rigged ship tosses above us on a stormy sea. As the camera cuts back to the child, still seated at his desk, we see that that he is soaked with spray. Just like Buñuel.

We might compare the failure of the walls to play their expected role in defining the spatial construction or status of the room, with the failure of the narrative to contain the spatial and temporal construction of *Un Chien andalou*. In both, the lack of closure makes it impossible to define what is real and what not, and necessitates an essentially mobile and creative response. And of course, like Buñuel's razor, Magritte's cannon threatens to destroy what we are looking at and with, particularly since it is aimed at clouds which, for him too, are frequently depicted in relation to eyes (for example, *Le Faux miroir*, 1929).²³

As in painting, eye, gaze, window and mirror figure repeatedly in the self-referential images of surrealist film, but film is able to go a stage further in exploring the nature of threshold since it adds movement, or at least the illusion of movement, to its depiction. This is beautifully illustrated in the bedroom scene in *L'Age d'or*, in which the shifting perspectives of inner and outer vision both meet in, and give rise to, the threshold image of the mirror, recalling Gratten's notion of surrealist image as 'a sentient lens, an aperture which sees, both a window on and a vision of surreality – *une fenêtre qui fait naître*'.²⁴ In this scene, the woman sits at her mirror, buffing her nails and dreaming of her lover; thus shots of her are interposed with shots of him, implying a readable narrative sequence. But, just as in *Un Chien andalou* we are faced with loose ends, incidents that do not fit and thus subvert the narrative construction. One of these is the bandage on her finger: now we see it, now we don't. Our confusion is further increased by the fact that just before this scene, in response to her mother's concern at the sight of the bandage, the woman claims that she has had it for the last eight days; a comment we have seen to be untrue.²⁵ Furthermore, the soundtrack (that much heralded means of enhancing film's realism) here serves to confuse narrative levels still further: throughout the scene we hear a cowbell, which can be accounted for since we have seen it hanging from the neck of the cow which, just a few minutes earlier, the woman nonchalantly chased from her bed, and which we may therefore assume to have remained just outside the bedroom door. However, we also hear the insistent barking of the dog which exists at a different place, time and narrative level altogether, and the noise of the wind which disconcertingly issues forth from the mirror, in what we might assume to be the woman's imagination were it not for the fact that we can actually see it blowing the flowers and ruffling her hair.²⁶ As different realities merge, and space and time are deconstructed, the mirror too refuses to function as mirror, as a flat surface which reflects our gaze. Like the screen, it has become a threshold which, as in Derrida's concept of *brisure*, is both entrance and exit, place of exchange and movement. Thus a closeup of the mirror reveals not the woman's reflection, but moving clouds (although it simultaneously continues to perform as mirror by

Davies refuses to distinguish between different realities; he uses the natural ambiguity of film to create the fundamental reality of the imagination.

27 See, for example Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, pp. 42–6; Y. Ishagpour, *Cinéma contemporain de ce côté du miroir* (Paris: Editions de la différence, 1986).

28 J. Lacan, *Écrits: a Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 2.

29 André Breton, *Second manifeste du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936), p. 86.

reflecting the line of glass bottles on the dressing table). As we cut to a view from directly behind the woman, we see the back of her head but not the reflection of her face (in an image which has many links with Magritte's *La Reproduction interdite*, 1937), her hair is still being ruffled by the wind blowing from the mirror which, for its part, still reflects clouds and sky. As the scene ends, the two contradictory realities of the mirror meet: the woman rests her head against its hard surface, but even as she does so, the wind continues to blow her hair, thus denying the very existence of that surface.

The mirror, that *objet filmique privilégié*²⁷ is, of course, a privileged place for self-regard and, as Lacan demonstrates, it plays an active role both within the individual's quest for subjective identity and – through its reflection of individual as Other – in the construction of that identity.²⁸ Buñuel's mirror does not reflect the woman's appearance, but her interior being; it moves us and her into the subconscious level, the locus of surrealism:

l'idée du surréalisme tend simplement à la récupération de notre force psychique par un moyen qui n'est autre que la descente vertigineuse en nous, l'illumination systématique des lieux cachés et l'obscurcissement progressif des autres lieux, la promenade perpétuelle en pleine zone interdite . . .

(surrealism aims quite simply to restore our psychic power through the vertiginous descent into our inner being, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual exploration of forbidden territory . . .)²⁹

Thus the unreflecting mirror reflects the unreflectable: the process of desire.

Buñuel's mirror thus recalls Matisse's *Porte-fenêtre* where, by denying the viewer access to a meaning, through its refusal to provide a mimetic image, the painting transfers its locus to the viewer's imagination: creator and creation are thereby unified through the infinite recess and regress of the look. But, as we have seen, Buñuel can introduce further layerings into his work through the use of sound and, essentially, movement. Film is able not only to designate its own function as a self-reflecting, self-generating work, but also, through its movement, to depict the very process of the descent into the hidden places of the unconscious. It is with this awareness that we can begin to understand the surrealists' conviction that film was inherently surrealist, that it was able to create quite spontaneously the confusion of opposites and the coexistence of contradictory states which they so constantly sought: 'Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité, si l'on peut ainsi dire' ('I believe in the future resolution of these two apparently contradictory states of dream and reality

30 André Breton, *Premier manifeste du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1924), p. 24.

31 Gardies, *Europe*, p. 152.

32 I. Bergman, *The Magic Lantern*, trans Joan Tate (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 73.

into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality, if I may put it that way').³⁰

A great deal of misunderstanding concerning the nature of surrealist film has arisen from a failure to recognize this central feature: its naturalness. Surrealist films do not attempt to portray a fantastic world, but a real one in which the fantastic, the *merveilleux*, is an integral part of the reality. They do not need complex special effects to create their disorientating topographies, since these are the outcome of the nature of filmic discourse: images which are simultaneously real and not real; constant flux or movement which denies these images any stability or certainty and constantly threatens their diegetic status; the juxtaposition of distant realities which is the natural dialectic of montage, but which can disrupt the spatial and temporal continuity of the narrative as easily as it creates it. 'Or, le cinéma est, par nature, l'instrument privilégié de déréalisation du monde. Ses ressources techniques ... alliées à la photogénie, offrent les moyens alchimiques d'une transmutation du réel' ('Now, the cinema is, quite naturally, the privileged instrument for de-realizing the world. Its technical resources ... allied with its photo-magic, provide the alchemical tools for transforming reality'), comments René Gardies, in an article entitled 'Le cinéma est-il surréaliste?'.³¹ Bergman reveals a similar understanding of the power of film when he claims that 'No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does'.³² Much of the power of Buñuel's directing results, as we have seen, from his ability to transform reality even as he creates it. The apparently straightforward realism of his films hides a disturbingly solid and subversive unreality: the *merveilleux* which results from the collision of inner and outer vision, the unexpected eruption of the subconscious into the rational world. Surrealists exploit the unreal/reality of film to create a world characterized by uncertainty in which the spectator feels increasingly disorientated.

In a dream sequence in *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972), Buñuel mercilessly confuses the spectator by refusing to use any of the classical codes which indicate a switch from one level of reality (the General's invitation) to the next (Sénéchal's dream). The unwary spectator is thus confronted with a series of impossible events to which he or she is obliged to accord an equivalent degree of reality. The sequence (which follows on from an entirely traditional narration and representation of the young soldier's dream), begins with a straight cut which transports us from Sénéchal's house to that of the General, as we hear the latter issuing his invitation to dinner, and announcing his address, 17 rue du Parc. The switch of place is signalled by a closeup of the name of the street, just before the camera pans down to show the guests arriving. Nothing therefore prepares us for the increasing strangeness of the scene which unfolds: the bourgeois dinner party is gradually revealed to be taking place on the stage of a packed theatre. One by one the guests shuffle

from the stage in embarrassment, to the sound of loud catcalls from the audience. Not until we hear a telephone ringing, and see Sénéchal wake up, can we identify what we have been watching as his dream, and thus recover our sense of control. But, of course, in Buñuel's work nothing is as simple as it at first seems: in fact the telephone which appears to move us back to waking reality is a *trompe l'oeil* (or *trompe l'oreille*) since it ultimately transpires that this dream and the following sequence, which we have labelled as reality but which rapidly becomes as astonishing as the previous one, are, in fact, both elements of a dream being had by a different character altogether (Thévenot). His confusion echoes our own: 'Je rêvais que ... non, je rêvais que Sénéchal rêvait que ...' ('I was dreaming that ... no, I was dreaming that Sénéchal was dreaming that ...') he stutters. Our reading of each sequence and, particularly, of objects common to both (for example, Napoleon's hat which features prominently in both sequences), must constantly be questioned and revised. Moreover, the playful editing discontinuities we noticed in *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or* happen here as well. How, for example, does Thévenot happen in his dream to hear intimate snatches of conversation between his wife and the Ambassador with whom (unbeknownst to him) she is having an affair? We are faced with countless similar loose ends which cannot be fitted into a single narrative reading. By ignoring classical editing codes and continuity, and by constantly subverting the narrative sequence he is creating, Buñuel exploits to the full the natural ambiguity of film, its ability to depict all events as equally real. In so doing, of course, he also foregrounds and explores the surrealist belief in the reality of dream and imagination.



La Coquille et le clergymen.

Picture courtesy: BFI Stills;

Light Cone, Paris.

33 Pierre Soupault in conversation with Jean-Marie Mabire, *Surréalisme et Cinéma*, special number of *Etudes Cinématiques*, nos 38–9 (1965), p. 29.

34 See, for example, Jean Goudal, 'Surréalisme et cinéma', *La Revue hebdomadaire*, no. 8 (February 1925), pp. 343–57.

35 Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: a Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp. 16–18.

36 *L'Age du cinéma*, pp. 24–5.

This brings us directly to the dream/film analogy, which emerged clearly right from the earliest surrealist writings for or about cinema, and which remains fundamental to surrealist film: 'nous considérons alors le film comme un merveilleux mode d'expression du rêve' ('at that time we considered film to be a marvellous way of expressing dreams').³³ The parallels between film and dream are too numerous to be explored in detail here, and are in any case widely recognized: both normally occur in the darkness; both create alternative universes which absorb and enthrall; both proceed via moving images which are simultaneously real and unreal, illogical and disturbing; both express the hidden realms of desire and the subconscious, and so on.³⁴ However, what really interested the surrealists was not a facile imitation of dream content, nor yet the attempt to make films that pretend to be dreams (indeed Artaud claimed that Dulac had entirely ruined his scenario for *La Coquille et le clergyman* by describing it in her film as a dream), but the exploration, through film, of the mechanics of dream; of the very processes by which dream creates its meanings. Perhaps the surrealists' most important contribution to film theory is their attempt to understand ways in which dream and film function as systems of communication which differ significantly from verbal language.³⁵

If, as we have suggested, cinema's true place is within the look itself, then film and dream meet within that look which must therefore be simultaneously directed inwards and outwards. For in both, the hauntingly real unreality of the landscapes we explore, with their insecure surface structures and unstable and transient landmarks, are simultaneously external and internal, their contours are shaped by our own subconscious desires. We are both looker and looked-at, explorer and explored. And if the screen is a mirror to our look, it is one which can only reflect the unreflectable, for it is mirror turned threshold, and it is through this threshold that inner and outer realities collide, and contradiction is destroyed. This explains why the surrealist moment of revelation, *le merveilleux*, may occur at any time, and in any film (Man Ray, for instance, claims that in even the worst films there will be 'ten or fifteen marvellous minutes'),³⁶ and why such moments will be different for different spectators.

Earlier I referred to the influence the surrealists had on contemporary European directors, but of course the impact of the movement is by no means limited to this side of the Atlantic. David Lynch is an example of a director who freely acknowledges his debt to surrealism, and the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* (1986) provides a striking example. In this sequence, Lynch shows us what seems to be an innocent and benign image of small-town America: bright flowers against a picket fence; a man contentedly watering his garden; healthy, happy children crossing a litter-free road. And yet, by depicting this world as just a little too bright, too nicely normal, too pure, Lynch stirs in the spectator an uncomfortable and

disturbing awareness of the suppressed desires and violence lurking below its squeaky clean surface. As outer and inner realities meet, the camera focuses in terrifying closeup on the ground, now become insecure, unstable; a delicate shell through which the hidden reality of the subconscious may, at any moment, erupt. The screen thus becomes the opening into our own subconscious desires and fears; the *descente vertigineuse* it imposes becomes our own.

Watching a surrealist film cannot be a passive experience because to watch is to create our own parallel films, and as we slip through the screen into the reality of the film, so too its images slip into us. Eye into eye, dream into dream. And if the surrealists, while still in their teens, were captivated by the magic realism of Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* (1913–14) or *Les Vampires* (1915–16), it is to no small extent because as they stepped out of the cinema into the cold evening light they found that reality itself had changed, had become insecure; that within its apparent realism anything might happen – for such is the revolutionary potential of film. Which brings us back to the eye and the razor; the slicing of our outward gaze through the surreal landscape of our inner vision.

Masculinity in the shadow of the slashed eye: surrealist film criticism at the crossroads

PHIL POWRIE

¹ Linda Williams, 'The critical grasp: Buñuelian cinema and its critics', in Rudolf Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film* (New York: Willis Locker and Owen, 1986), pp. 199–206.

In 1986 Linda Williams reviewed the critical discourses which had been applied to the films of Buñuel.¹ Using the metaphor of the torn dress which the unknown woman begins to sew up towards the end of *Cet obscur objet du désir/That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), she herself ended with an elegant critique of her own Lacanian-inspired discourse, emphasizing the folly of attempting to 'sew up' a film discourse which apparently relies so much on undecidability. At the risk of appearing myself to want to sew up a discourse which is fractured, lacerated, I shall repeat her critical gesture ten years on, applying it to surrealist film generally. I shall first give a brief history of surrealist film. The main part of this essay will review her review, reiterating some of the points she made to see whether there have been any significant advances in surrealist film criticism in the decade since her essay.

The point of the title of this essay is multiple: surrealist film, both historically and theoretically, occurs at crossroads. The first set of crossroads is historical: it is the intersection between avant-garde and impressionist films of the 1920s and the poetic realist films of the 1930s, combined with a second intersection, namely the transition between silent films and sound films, which, as I shall explain in my brief history, is important for an understanding of the paucity of surrealist film production. As will now be clear, for the purposes of this essay I shall be limiting surrealist film to the period stretching from the 1920s to the early 1930s, and surrealist film criticism to

films produced in that period, even though it can be argued, as do Paul Hammond and Ado Kyrou, for example, that surrealist film should be considered as a general category which extends well beyond this period.

There is a second set of crossroads which is theoretical in nature and which forms the substance of this essay. When the critical discourses surrounding surrealist film are considered, it can be seen that the films are caught between a discourse which does not distance itself from its object, and one which does; although it is the second which has by and large become dominant since the late 1970s. Within the more distanced critical discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, there is a further intersection, that between two currently dominant modes of film criticism: Lacanian-inspired spectatorship theory, espoused by Williams and developed latterly along feminist lines by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis;² and the return to history or historical poetics, epitomized for the period which concerns us here by Richard Abel's work.³

Before exploring these different theoretical paradigms, I shall give a brief history of surrealist film. The surrealists embraced the new medium of film enthusiastically. In his famous 1951 article, 'Comme dans un bois',⁴ Breton recounts how he and Vaché would go from one cinema to the other indiscriminately, thus creating a collage of cinematic experiences whose end was a productive disorientation. The surrealists wrote enthusiastically about films, particularly films focusing on love, and with a strong preference for horror films (*Nosferatu le vampire*) and comedies (Chaplin, Keaton), the attraction of the latter being their subversive reversal of values. The surrealists themselves made very few films; indeed, several films often classed as surrealist were made by ex members or proselytizers of the Dada group, for example René Clair's and Francis Picabia's *Entr'acte* (1924), Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic cinéma* (1926), or the films made by Hans Richter (1927–9). Surrealist films are frequently confined to the shorts of Man Ray (1923–9), which include *Emak Bakia* (1926); *La Coquille et le clergyman* (Antonin Artaud/Germaine Dulac, 1927); *L'Etoile de mer* (Man Ray on a poem by Robert Desnos, 1928); Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien andalou* (1929), and Buñuel's *L'Âge d'or* (1930). Critics who can be classed as surrealist proselytizers in the taxonomy I adopted above, such as Michael Gould, Kyrou, Hammond and J.H. Matthews, have made strong cases for later films, whether by surrealists or not.

Surrealists and surrealist proselytizers ended up creating more film scripts than films during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Enthusiasm for the medium diminished rapidly after the coming of sound, and the surrealist attitude to film after that period is usually summed up in Breton's lapidary judgement in 1951, that he could not 'refrain from a certain nostalgia for the idea of what the cinema might have become, and to allow that the sordidness of the epoch,

2 See, particularly, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, 'The image and the spark: Dulac and Artaud reviewed', in Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film*, pp. 110–27; *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

3 Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); *French Film Theory and Criticism: 1907–1939*, two volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

4 André Breton, 'Comme dans un bois', *L'Âge du cinéma*, nos 4–5 (1951).

5 Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), p. 45.

6 Ibid., p. 44.

7 Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism*.

8 Ado Kyrou, *Le surréalisme au cinéma* (Paris: Arcanes, 1953).

9 Ibid., p. 9.

10 J.H. Matthews, *Surrealism and Film* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971).

11 Ibid., p. 176.

together with certain conditions – worse than the others – of its “exploitation”, were enough to clip its wings as soon as it flew the nest’.⁵ The reasons normally advanced for the paucity of surrealist film production are, following Breton, the commercial nature of film production, with the corollary of high production costs, particularly once sound was introduced, and the surrealists’ passive attitude to films, which they saw as pre-existing elements in the greater design of a collage experience aiming for ‘super-disorientation’.⁶

The 1920s saw an efflorescence of discourses on film, to which several surrealists and surrealist proselytizers contributed (such as Artaud, Robert Desnos and Benjamin Fondane). These have been anthologized by Richard Abel,⁷ and I shall disregard them since they do not constitute what I would like to term critical discourses on specific surrealist films. These began at the same time as the beginnings of modern film theory, which can be said to have started with the *politique des auteurs* of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the mid 1950s.

Surrealist proselytizers: 1950 to late 1970s

Amongst surrealist proselytizers, we can distinguish two positions. The earlier position is the least critical. Ado Kyrou, a member of the movement, wrote his *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* in 1953.⁸ Kyrou’s few comments on *Un Chien andalou* are caught up in sectarian views as he tries to separate Buñuel’s input from Dalí’s: ‘I am convinced that Buñuel and Dalí were aiming at different things. Buñuel sought to catch a glimpse of that incandescent world in which dream and reality mingle in a magnificent gesture of liberation; Dalí hoped to shock the bourgeoisie.’⁹ Kyrou’s partisan approach was shared by Matthews, the foremost academic working in surrealism in the 1970s, whose *Surrealism and Film* appeared in 1971.¹⁰ This approach adopted the surrealist aesthetic as a guide, and used it to judge films which could be seen as surrealist beyond the very few produced by the surrealists themselves. An example of the circular nature of this type of criticism can be found in Matthews’s conclusion, where he says that ‘when a surrealist shoots a movie, his dearest hope is to provide a succession of cinematic images, free from dependence on theatrical plot, stimulating the imagination to explore in directions that surrealism teaches him to regard as promising’;¹¹ that is to say, the films examined are surrealist because they match the aims of the surrealists. At least Matthews concentrated on surrealists making film, stretching from Buñuel to the 1950s and 1960s generation (Benayoun, Brunius, Goldfayn, Heisler, Mariën). Gould, on the other hand, writing in 1976, has more to say about the supposed surrealist content of films by Fuller,

- 12 Michael Gould, *Surrealism and the Cinema: Open-Eyed Screening* (South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes and Co. / London: Tantivy Press, 1976).
- 13 Hammond, *The Shadow and its Shadow*.
- 14 Alain and Odette Virmaux, *Les Surréalistes et le cinéma* (Paris: Seghers, 1976).

- 15 Luis Buñuel, 'Notes on the making of *Un Chien Andalou*', in Joan Mellen (ed.), *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 153. Originally published in Frank Stauffacher (ed.), *Art in Cinema*, trans G.L. McCann Morley (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1947).
- 16 François Piazza, 'Considérations psychanalytiques sur *Le Chien andalou* de Luis Buñuel et Salvador Dalí', *Psyché*, nos 27–8 (January–February 1949), pp. 147–56.
- 17 Mondragon, 'Comment j'ai compris *Un Chien andalou*', *Revue du Ciné-Club*, nos 8–9 (May–June 1949).
- 18 Pierre Renaud, 'Symbolisme au second degré: *Un Chien andalou*', *Études Cinématographiques*, nos 22–33 (1963), pp. 147–57, 149.
- 19 Raymond Durnat, *Luis Buñuel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Hitchcock, Sternberg and even Disney, than about surrealist films proper.¹²

The second, later approach in this period coincided with the beginnings of post-Bazinian film theory of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It still adopted the surrealist viewpoint, but it introduced a distance from its object by the agency of the anthology. Hammond,¹³ especially, and Alain and Odette Virmaux¹⁴ enthusiastically chronicled surrealist film history, adopting as their theoretical tools, like Kyrout and Matthews, the search for a coincidence between surrealist aesthetics and surrealist film production, and emphasizing the surrealist spirit in films not usually thought of as part of the movement. The difference in their approach was that having produced a historical context, they let the anthologized pieces speak for themselves. In the case of Hammond, whose tone is like a mixture of Kyrout's and Matthews's, the effect is peculiarly schizophrenic, in that the historical distance established by the anthologizing seems to be at odds with the proselytizing historical context which prefaces the anthology.

Critical theory developed rapidly in Parisian circles just before and in the wake of 1968, and it soon became clear that an academic critic could not avoid the new critical paradigms. Where film theory is concerned, the paradigms were first a semiotic-structuralist approach, almost immediately displaced by a psychoanalytical approach. The only surrealist film to be examined by critics of these persuasions during the 1970s or before, where the psychoanalytical approach is concerned, was *Un Chien andalou*.

Early psychoanalytical theory: late 1960s

Commentators, encouraged no doubt by Buñuel's statement in 1947 that 'the only method of investigation of the symbols would be, perhaps, psychoanalysis',¹⁵ began applying psychoanalytical frameworks as early as 1949 (see Piazza,¹⁶ Mondragon¹⁷). These remained largely unknown, as Renaud pointed out in his own psychoanalytical reading of 1963,¹⁸ and it is only with Durnat's book on Buñuel in 1968¹⁹ that a psychoanalytical reading gained a wide audience. Durnat, like Mondragon and Renaud before him (both of whom he quotes), assumed that a psychoanalytical interpretation of *Un Chien andalou* should tell an allegorical master narrative, filling the gap left by the evident fractures of the film. The fact that the psychoanalytical interpretations by Mondragon, Renaud and Durnat are all slightly different does not appear to be a problem for Durnat, who points out that 'in the indiscriminate, global terms of the unconscious, each formulation is an aspect of another, each applies to a different sphere of experience, a fundamental pattern of repression, rage and panic'.²⁰ What the three

readings have in common is that they all recount the sexual development of a single hypothetical protagonist. The shortest of these is Mondragon's, and since it has not to my knowledge been translated, I reproduce it here (the account contains inaccuracies):

Once upon a time there was a small child who was born (corresponding shot: the razor stropped on leather); when the pregnancy was reaching its end (full moon), he was born (c.f. the slit eye). Then he grew up, learnt how to walk (which Buñuel illustrates with the character on a bicycle wearing a bib); but his steps are unsteady, he falls and needs his mother to get up again. Although he loves his mother, he also loves himself, seeking pleasure from his own body (c.f. the hands with holes where ants are swarming) and finds amongst his companions someone whom he can love (i.e. the androgyne filmed in the road). Then he turns to the Mother, trying to grab her. Stopped by his super-ego, he drags his past behind him (gourds or ancestral traditions; monks or the constraints of catholic morality; a piano, or immutable harmonies; finally donkeys or stupidity). He reverts to infantile regressions when he remembers his schoolbooks; he rebels against himself and attempts to kill the ego which condemns him to remain a child. Nobody helps him (the characters in the park do not move, indifferent to the body being taken away). One day, a woman comes to see him: he does not know how to handle her, and makes fun of her (the lipstick). Another man calls her; annoyed, she throws herself into his arms.²¹

21 In Renaud, 'Symbolisme au second degré', pp. 149-50.

The problem with this kind of approach was highlighted by the next major type of critical approach, the semiotic. Drummond pointed out how the 'whole film has still to be rescued from the ravages of a primitive psychoanalysis bent on the unearthing of a straightforward psychosexual allegory at the "core" of *Un Chien andalou*'.²²

22 Phillip Drummond, 'Textual space in *Un chien andalou*', *Screen*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1977), p. 91.

Semiotic criticism: mid 1970s

Under the impact of critical theory arising in the wake of May 1968, semiotic criticism, inherited from Metz in his mid-1960s structuralist phase, and based on a disinterested and sceptical analysis of the object, resisted judgement or the ascription of meaning, particularly a meaning generated by the surrealist movement itself, confining its analysis to aspects of disruption. Drummond's painstaking formalist description of *Un Chien andalou* appeared in *Screen* in 1977, and was intended to be the first part of a longer study which never appeared.²³ Drummond's approach is to review and to confront the various critical views of the film, showing how inadequate and contradictory most of them are, often bearing very little relation to,

23 Ibid.

indeed often wilfully distorting, what can be seen on the screen. This approach was not developed, mainly because film theory moved very quickly in the 1970s to new paradigms.

Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism: 1970s to the present

During the early 1970s Metz moved away from semiotic and structuralist approaches to a Lacanian-inspired psychoanalytical approach which was considerably more rigorous than the early psychoanalytical approaches. Whereas Mondragon, for example, had posited a unified subject as the origin of meaning (*Un Chien andalou* being the dream of a unified subject, or the thematized development of that subject), Metz's approach examined film as a vehicle for the positioning of the spectator, attempting to answer the question not 'what does this film mean?' but 'in what position does this film place the spectator?' This theoretical approach, often called spectatorship theory, has been the dominant critical paradigm ever since the early 1970s, although it has seen various permutations, the major one being feminist film theory.²⁴ Among the various critics Drummond patiently and ruthlessly dismantled in 1977 was Linda Williams's study of the prologue to *Un Chien andalou*, which had appeared in *Screen* in the winter of 1976.²⁵ Williams developed her approach in a major work in 1981, inaugurating a new trend in surrealist film criticism, inspired by the psychoanalytic Metz of the mid 1970s and by Baudry.²⁶ Durgnat, keen to use Buñuel's own suggestion that psychoanalysis might be the only productive way to analyse *Un Chien andalou*, had used psychoanalysis uncritically, applying it to tell a 'story' which the film is bent on undermining. Williams's approach was to conceive of the film's disruptions not as something to be resolved, but as the whole point of the film. As she said, 'unconscious desire, if it is to be present in film in the way in which it is present in dreams, cannot also be "represented" there as a subject: it must be perceived, as the unconscious desires of dreams are perceived, through the transgressions of a more familiar discourse'.²⁷

Feminist criticism: 1975 to present

What Williams's 1981 book did not do was to engage in feminist criticism; nor was she able to review feminist critiques of Buñuel's films in her review of Buñuel criticism in the 1986 issue of *Dada/Surrealism*²⁸ since then, as now, there has not been any substantial feminist work on Buñuel's films. In that same issue of *Dada/Surrealism*, however, Flitterman-Lewis, one of the founding members of the key feminist film journal *Camera Obscura* in 1974, published a major article on *La Coquille et le clergyman*, reworked

²⁴ For an intellectual history of this paradigm, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994).

²⁵ Linda Williams, 'The prologue to *Un Chien andalou*', *Screen*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1976–7), pp. 24–33.

²⁶ Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological effects of the basic cinematic apparatus', *Film Quarterly*, vol. XXVII, no. 2 (1974–5).

²⁷ Williams, 'Prologue to *Un Chien andalou*', p. 28.

²⁸ Articles from *Dada/Surrealism*, a journal edited by Rudolph Kuenzli, are contained in Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film*. Williams's article appears in this collection.

29 Flitterman-Lewis, 'The image and the spark', in Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film*, p. 131.

30 Ibid., p. 134.

31 Ibid., p. 136.

32 Ibid., p. 137.

from her thesis of 1982, and eventually to find its way into the first part of an important feminist-inspired work on French women directors in 1990, which devoted several chapters to the work of Dulac. Dulac's work, according to Flitterman-Lewis, 'can be said to represent the feminist project of conceptualizing different ways of articulating women's relation to language and the body'.²⁹ The way Dulac does this in *La Coquille et le clergyman* is by 'activating the female image as representation itself, for it is here that the female body – and the very processes of desire that constitute it as "feminine" – undergo a sustained investigation throughout the film'.³⁰ That investigation occurs in two distinct ways. The first is by the representation of the woman's body itself on screen. Thus the closeups and the (at least for the time) very daring use of (apparently) naked breasts bring the spectator 'closer to a reinforcing physicality, aligning femininity with the body, while at the same time creating a breach between the image and its referent. It thus obliges us to read the image as a sign circulating in the textual space of the film'.³¹ The second way is by the various narrative disruptions, which Flitterman-Lewis, following Williams, considers to 'suggest something of the dynamism of the unconscious forces and in so doing (to) elicit possible alternative constructions of the "feminine"'.³²

Historical poetics: 1985 to present

At the same time as theorists in the mid to late 1980s were coming to terms with the inadequacy of spectatorship theory to resolve a female spectator's relationship to what is happening on screen, a shift towards history had started with an emphasis which involved reliance on archival and field work. Where surrealist film is concerned, this return to history, which might have seemed unproblematic in the wake of the anthologies by Hammond and the Virmaux, has in a sense cut surrealism down to historical size. Abel's work on surrealist films themselves in *The First Wave* does little more than recycle the views of critics such as Williams. It is, however, the context in which he places these films that matters. In *The First Wave* he places surrealism in the context of French cinema culture, where it figures only briefly, even in its category of avant-garde film. In the later, massive, two-volume 'archaeological' project of the history of early *French Film Theory and Criticism*, Abel, like Hammond and the Virmaux, anthologizes. Unlike them, however, the anthology is not surrealist-specific. Surrealism is again a small player in the critical debates of the 1920s and 1930s, placed firmly within the context of a developing set of arguments about the nature of film, which, put briefly and rather schematically, is the old chestnut of realism versus fantasy, the surrealists falling firmly into the

second camp. Previous readings of surrealism and film which focused principally on the surrealists themselves, and not much on the contexts of film production in the 1920s, led to what now seems like a peculiar distortion: either surrealist film was proclaimed a disappointment, following late Breton; or the surrealist spirit was retro-nostalgically distinguished in non-surrealist films, matching the early enthusiasms of Breton. Neither of these positions seems particularly apt in the light of Abel's work, which places the surrealists firmly within a dynamic context of theoretical reflection on the value of the medium by the Parisian intelligentsia, of whom the surrealists were only a small part. A similar approach has been adopted as the framework of Ramona Fotiade's recent article in *Screen*, where she points out that 'the surrealist exploration of dreams, of visual and imaginary processes in the cinema, uncovers an ambivalent relationship to competing avant-garde theories and practices of the 1920s and 1930s, such as the abstract and Impressionist cinema'.³³

³³ Ramona Fotiade, 'The untamed eye: surrealism and film theory', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1995), p. 395.

There is a second point raised by Abel's work. The nostrum on surrealism and film is that the surrealists were passive in relation to the medium, using it, much like a drug, as a form of *dépaysement*, or disorientation. Abel's work helps us understand that although this is true, it is only true to the extent that there is very little surrealist film production. There is, however, apart from the many unfilmed scenarios, a considerable body of work reflecting actively on the medium, written both by surrealists and non-surrealists. The shift in emphasis now necessary for scholars of surrealist films in the light of Abel's work is considerable, since it places more emphasis on film studies than it does on surrealism, echoing the shift in more general surrealist studies which began with the examination of the Parisian avant garde when Jean-Michel Place began to publish their journals in facsimile editions in the mid 1970s. (Curiously, in 1996 Place took over as the publisher of *Positif*, the film journal which had surrealist sympathies during the 1950s.)³⁴ The new emphasis on film studies does not necessarily deny the impact of the early surrealist films, few though they may be. It does suggest, however, a more realistic view of the context of intellectual history than the 'surrealist film in a vacuum' which underlay the critical work of the 1950s to mid 1970s period in particular.

³⁴ See Hammond, *The Shadow and its Shadow*, pp. 14–15 for an evaluation of the surrealist thinking on the journal's policies.

Masculinity: 1980 to present

I began with Williams's review from 1986, in which she suggested that feminist or deconstructionist critiques of Buñuel had yet to be evolved. In fact, Flitterman-Lewis's critique of the Artaud/Dulac intersection has been the only major development in surrealist film criticism in the last decade, if one accepts the historical definition of

surrealist film as those films produced in the period between 1920 and the early 1930s. On the whole, surrealist film critics have been careful to document their research historically, as can be seen in Flitterman-Lewis's work on *La Coquille et le clergyman*. Indeed, her article in *Dada/Surrealism* rubs shoulders with an article by Abel on surrealist film scenarios. On the assumption that surrealist film critics follow where film theorists dare to tread, there does not therefore seem to be a need to historicize surrealist film, grounding it in careful archival work, since this has already been done.

On the other hand, we might expect a turn towards masculinity by surrealist film critics, since this last avatar of psychoanalytical film criticism has gradually come to prominence, parallel to the rise of gender studies during the 1980s. Where surrealist film is concerned, we might expect a critique of masculinity in Buñuel's specifically surrealist films, perhaps dwelling on the masochistic positioning of the male protagonists in *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or*. This approach has, in fact, been developed by Peter William Evans in his 1995 book on Buñuel, although he focuses principally on the Mexican Buñuel and *Cet obscur objet du désir*.³⁵ In his view, Buñuel's males are 'simultaneously the victims and aggressors of desire, blinded not only by their own gestures of self-mortification, but also by a failure to interrogate the causes and motivations of their repetitive and ultimately self-destructive passions'.³⁶ Evans's choice of *Cet obscur objet du désir* clearly helps him to focus on male masochism, since Mathieu's attraction and submission to Conchita 'is in part a representation of male desire no longer simply disavowing difference. It is the dramatization of a masochistic fantasy forcing men to address questions of femininity, to submit to certain processes of feminization.'³⁷ Even if Batcheff's and Modot's

³⁵ Peter William Evans, *The Films of Luis Buñuel: Subjectivity and Desire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–3

Cet obscur objet du désir.
Picture courtesy: BFI Stills;
Greenwich Film.



position in relation to Mareuil and Lys respectively, in the two early films, is less clear cut than this comment on the later films might imply, there is evidently scope for an analysis of the figurations of male desire as masochism in them.

This could be linked to an analysis of the moustachioed Modot in *L'Age d'or*, poacher of desire turned into the gamekeeper of Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* some ten years later. It might also dwell on the self-parody of Pierre Batcheff in *Un Chien andalou*, 'the French James Dean of the 1920s', according to Drummond.³⁸ Audiences of *Un Chien andalou* (December 1929) would have associated Batcheff with his role as a Russian officer in Raymond Bernard's enormously successful historical spectacular *Joueur d'échecs* (1927) or as Albert de Morcerf in Nalpas's *Monte-Cristo* (June 1929; this also had in its cast Gaston Modot as Fernand Mondego), and more particularly as the lawyer Frémisson in Clair's comedy based on a Labiche play, *Les Deux timides*, which opened in April 1929. Abel suggests that Batcheff's acting 'is clearly modelled on Chaplin'.³⁹ When we remember that it is likely that the piano scene in *Un Chien andalou* is a replay of Keaton's piano gag in *One Week*,⁴⁰ the film appears curiously unstable, fissured by references to the romantic stereotype of the lover which is constantly undermined by the frankly comic. Instability, I would contend, is not so much a figuration of desire, as Williams argued ten years ago, than a symptom of masculinity in crisis. The males of the three main surrealist films (*La Coquille et le clergyman*, *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or*) are discomfited, undone, almost helpless in the face of the necessary repression of their overwhelming desire.

However, it could be argued, particularly in the case of Buñuel, that what we remember the films for is less their elements of comedy and parody than their extreme violence. The slashed eye of *Un Chien andalou* functions in this conception as an apparently radical gesture of revolt, whose provocation forms part of the surrealists' aesthetic anarchism around 1928 to 1930. It is not for nothing that the second manifesto and the shooting script of the film both appeared in the final issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1929, both vehicling a total rejection of society's materialism, as can be seen from the two extracts below:

Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, or sabotage according to rule, and why it still expects nothing save from violence. The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level.⁴¹

³⁸ Drummond, 'Textual space in *Un Chien andalou*', p. 78.

³⁹ Abel, *French Cinema: the First Wave*, p. 231.

⁴⁰ See Drummond, 'Textual space in *Un Chien andalou*', p.79.

⁴¹ Breton, 'Comme dans un bois', p. 2. Translated in Hammond, *The Shadow and its Shadow*.

42 Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí,
'Un Chien andalou'. *La Révolution
surréaliste*, no. 12 (1929), p. 34.

This scenario . . . expresses without reservation of any kind my complete adherence to the thought and activity of the surrealists. *Un Chien andalou* would not have existed if surrealism had not existed. 'A successful film' is what the majority of people who saw it thought. But what can I do about people who are crazy for anything going on even if the novelty outrages their inmost convictions, or a venal or insincere press, or about that pack of imbeciles who found beauty or poetry in what is, in essence, nothing less than a passionate appeal to murder?⁴²

The violence which these two extracts evidence does not seem to have much to do with despair, discomfiture or impotence, let alone masochism. And yet there is, I would contend, a link to be made with the social context of surrealism in 1929. The second manifesto chronicles Breton's disappointments. Surrealism was besieged by competing avant-garde groups, rejected by the PCF, betrayed, as Breton saw it, by surrealists who felt the need to earn their living by being journalists. The second manifesto calls ostentatiously for surrealism's retreat from such worldly matters, an 'occultation', an almost mystical retreat from the exoteric to esoteric, as indeed was to occur in a much more literal sense with the emphasis on myth in the mid 1930s and the attraction to the occult in the 1950s. In the same year as Breton bad-temperedly 'retreated', spectators were confronted by the drama of constantly frustrated male desire in *Un Chien andalou*, a desire undermined by parody and excess, and coupled with self-mutilation: the fall from the bicycle, the hole in the hand as the stigma of desire, the killing of the double, the blasphemously drooling Christ of the bleeding eyes who fondles Mareuil's breasts and buttocks, the buried failure of the epilogue.

In this optic, male masochism seems just as likely an interpretation of the paradox of a violently public occultation of surrealism as any attempt to justify it as a radical aesthetic. This is particularly the case in our sceptical, postmodernist *fin de siècle*, where gender appears increasingly an accident, a joke played by a silent God, as aleatory as the dress codes which *Un Chien andalou* playfully questions. An emphasis on this playfulness at least has the merit of making us consider laughter as an appropriate response, even if the laughter might be forced. Laughter can thus act as a palliative to the melancholic nostrum concerning *Un Chien andalou*, that the castrating shock of the slashed eye forces the male gaze to confront itself in a violent moment of visual apocalypse.

The sounds of silence: Benjamin Fondane and the cinema

ERIC FREEDMAN

- 1 Benjamin Fondane, *Mots sauvages*, trans. Marina Vancî-Perahim and Odile Serre (Paris, 1929). Preface to: *'Paysages (Privilesti), Poèmes 1917–1923*, in Benjamin Fondane, *Le Mal des fantômes*, précédé de *Paysages*. (Paris: Editions Paris-Méditerranée/Toulouse: L'Ether vague, 1996), p. 21.
- 2 Fondane, *Ulysse*, in *Le mal des fantômes*, p. 92. First published in *Cahiers du Journal des poètes* (Bruxelles, 1933) and rewritten during World War II.

- 3 See his letter to the poet Claude Sernet, dated February 1930, published in Patrice Beray and Michel Carassou (eds), *Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager* (Paris: Editions Paris-Méditerranée/Toulouse: L'Ether vague, 1996), p. 55.
- 4 See Benjamin Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* (Paris: Plasma, 1982), p. 23.

*Les mots se sont débarrassés de moi; dans la nuit, j'ai commencé
à crier sans mots*¹

(Words abandoned me; I started to cry out in the night, without
words)

*Le film, le film est-il tellement captivant que projette la mort sur
l'écran de la vie?*²

(Is the film so riveting, the film which death projects on life's
screen?)

Among the many facets of Benjamin Fondane – poet, philosopher, literary critic, dramatist – I want to select those concerning the cinema, especially his critical writings between 1925 and 1934. An avid filmgoer during the interwar period, Fondane wrote essays on the cinema, published in Romania, France and Argentina, as well as film scenarios in the surrealist vein. He became a professional scriptwriter for Paramount in the 1930s. Although never a member of the surrealist group, indeed excoriating Breton for his '*escroquerie au miracle*'³ (miracle fraud), he took a critical stance in his writings against the advent of the talkies, as did many intellectual observers and filmmakers of the time. I will discuss his position in relation to his aesthetic theories and the experiential visceral philosophy he developed: a position which was strongly influenced by the existential thinker Lev Shestov.⁴

First of all, however, I will give some brief biographical

information, before concentrating on Fondane's sharp, acute look on the language and silence of film.

5 For further information on Fondane and the theatre, see my article 'The theatre of Benjamin Fondane', *Approches*, no. 3 (University of Haifa, 1985), pp. 70–79.

Benjamin Fondane was born in Jassy, Romania in 1898, moving to Bucharest in 1919, where he became well known as an essayist and literary critic, founding a short-lived experimental theatre group 'Insula' in 1922.⁵ He emigrated to France in 1923, first working for an insurance company, then for the Paramount studios at Joinville-le-Pont during the 1930s, and most notably as scriptwriter for *Rapt*, directed in Switzerland by Dimitri Kirsanoff in 1933.

He visited Argentina twice, at the invitation of its leading lady of letters, Victoria Ocampo: first in 1929, with lectures on surrealist cinema, and again in 1936, to make his own film, *Tatarara*, since lost.

By the time he was naturalized French in 1938 he had published some of his major poetic and critical works (*Cinépoèmes*, 1928; his Romanian poems, *Privelisti*, 1930; regular reviews in the *Cahiers du Sud* from 1932; *Ulysse* and *Rimbaud le voyou*, 1933; *La Conscience malheureuse*, 1936; *Titanic*, 1937; *Faux traité d'esthétique*, 1938). In May 1944, denounced as Jewish, he was arrested and deported with his sister, the actress Line Pascal, and killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau in October.

I have argued elsewhere that we may consider Fondane's multiple facets to be modulations of his cry of exile, as a Jew in Romania, a Romanian Jew in France, a French existentialist challenging the dominance of Rationalism and Reason.⁶ His work on the cinema forms a modulation of silence in absence, the silent film being for him *un mode d'expression* (form of expression), an expression of movement and being that transcends spoken language, the logos, *la parole* (speech). The superimposition of images creates its own language, non-rational, standing against Reason.

His interest in the silent film reflects the actual poetic silence that followed his arrival in Paris, and his putting into question an aesthetic justification of the universe. He had lost faith in the power of language, in its *bavardage* (endless chatter), in words, and put his faith in the art of the silent film, identified with a form of life. In his presentation of avant-garde films in Buenos Aires in July 1929, he said:

Nous sommes quelques-uns dans ce monde à avoir accordé au cinéma, comme moyen d'expression, une confiance . . . accordée *in extremis* . . . Quelle est la nature de la confiance? . . . Sais-je . . . ce que vous espérez de la vie? et de vous-même? La promesse du cinéma n'est pas mesurable.

(Some of us have put our trust in the cinema as form of expression . . . the trust one only grants *in extremis*. . . . What kind

6 Freedman, 'Benjamin Fondane: Philoctetes and the scream of exile', *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, vol. 6, no.1 (New York, 1994), pp. 51–62.

7 Benjamin Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, (Paris: Plasma, 1984).

8 Benjamin Fondane, 'Entr'acte ou le cinéma autonome', *Integral*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Bucharest, 1925). Republished in Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 51–4. *Integral* (1925–8) was edited in Bucharest by Ilarie Voronca and F. Brunea-Fox, and in Paris by Fondane and M. Teutsch. Special issues appeared in 1925 on Arghezi and Brancusi. Contributors included Ezra Pound, Max Jacob and Marinetti.

9 Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, p. 52.

10 Benjamin Fondane, *Rimbaud le voyou* (Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1990), p. 94.

11 Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 52–3.

12 Benjamin Fondane, *Trois scénarii. Ciné-poèmes* (Paris: Les documents internationaux de l'esprit nouveau, 1928). Republished in Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 13–47, and in Christian Janicot, *Anthologie du cinéma invisible* (Paris: Editions Arte/Jean-Michel Place, 1995), pp. 253–9. Translated into English by Leonard Schwartz in *Frank*, vol. 1, no. 5 (Paris, 1986), pp. 25–6; *The Literary Review*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Madison, 1987), pp. 468–71; *Pequod*, vol. 28, no. 30 (New York, 1989), pp. 186–94.

13 Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, p. 20.

of trust might that be? . . . Do you expect me to know what you want out of life, and from yourself? The promise of the cinema cannot be measured.)⁷

His first published article after his arrival in France was on René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924), and appeared in 1925 in the first issue of *Integral*, a Romanian avant-garde literary and critical monthly review.⁸ *Entr'acte*, he says, speaking of *Relâche* and the dance performance by Rolf de Maré's *Ballets suédois*, 'fut une vraie tranche d'art entre deux tartines d'un sandwich rassis' ('was a real filling of art between two halves of a stale sandwich').⁹ In this review we see Fondane's desire for totality (expressed elsewhere in his poetry and plays), totality being linked to visceral fulfilment and to the experiential totality of being, as in the *Zohar* of the Kabbalah, to be cited by Fondane in *Rimbaud le voyou*.¹⁰

Nous vîmes le Tout, bousculé, brouillé, emmêlé à force de vitesse . . . une transsubstantiation universelle s'opérait . . . Je souhaite à René Clair d'être le Rimbaud du cinéma.

(The speed was such that we saw the Great Whole being jostled, jammed, tangled up . . . a universal transsubstantiation was taking place. . . I would like to think that René Clair will become the Rimbaud of the cinema.)¹¹

Fondane's first published book in French was a series of three *scénarii intournables* (unfilmable scenarios) entitled *Ciné-poèmes*, illustrated by a Man Ray photograph of him.¹² Poetry had come back to him – in cinematographic form. As Fondane adopted a philosophical mode to respond to Shestov's ideas, and a poetic and dramatic mode of expression to pose himself questions, so he adopted a cinematographic mode to send out, albeit silently, his visceral questioning before the abyss.

Pourquoi m'attacher délibérément à ce néant ? . . . C'est qu'une partie de moi-même que la poésie refoulait pour pouvoir poser ses propres questions angoissantes, vient de trouver dans le cinéma un haut-parleur à toute épreuve.

(Why would I deliberately become attached to this nothing? . . . It's because a part of me, which could not find an outlet for its anguished questions in poetry, has just found its unfailing loudspeaker in the cinema.)¹³

In '2 × 2', his introduction to the three scenarios, he sees the film both as exaltation of self-exile and as a response to classical rationality, recalling the figure of exile and anguish throughout Fondane's work. 'Exaltation d'un besoin de se fuir . . . et de cette impuissance à le faire. . . ALLONS DONC AU CINEMA puisque voici le seul art qui n'a jamais été classique' ('The glorification of a need to escape oneself . . . and of this inability to do so. . . Let us

14 Ibid., p. 16.

15 Ibid., p. 17.

16 Ibid., p. 18.

17 Ibid., p. 19.

18 Benjamin Fondane, 'Présentation de films purs', in *ibid.*, pp. 55–69. First published as 'Presentacion de films puros. Homenaje a Victoria Ocampo', *Sintesis* (Buenos Aires, 1929), vol. 3, no. 28, pp. 9–20. Extract of French MS also published in Beray and Carassou (eds), *Le voyageur*, p. 48. Fondane comments on this visit: 'J'y étais allé parler des films abstraits', Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*, p. 46.

19 Fondane, *Ecrits pour le cinéma*, p. 58.

20 Ibid., pp. 57, 58, 59, 67.

21 Ibid., p. 57.

22 Ibid., p. 61.

23 Ibid., p. 62.

then go to the cinema since that is the only art which has never been classical.')

The grammar of film (movement, closeups, superimposition) reveals a reality behind reality. 'Il introduit la notion de la quantité lyrique' ('It introduces the notion of lyrical quantity').¹⁵ But the cinema plays with us – 'C'est nous qui sommes son unique proie' ('We are its sole prey')¹⁶ – to the point of destruction.

Nous ne pouvons nous intéresser qu'à l'homme et à ce qui le détruit. . . . Que le cinéma permette . . . à l'homme de regarder plus avant dans les choses, n'en doutons pas. . . . Mais il aura servi . . . à nous réunir devant un *malentendu* . . . à multiplier les chances de ce qu'on appelle 'vivre'.

(We can be interested only in man and in what destroys him. . . . There's no doubt that cinema allows man to look more deeply into things. . . . But it will also have contributed to bringing us together in front of a *misunderstanding* . . . multiplying the chances of what we call 'living'.)¹⁷

The three *Ciné-poèmes* – *Paupière mûres*, *Barre fixe* and *Mtasipol* – take the form of numbered brief visual sequences or flashes, similar to today's video clips, sequences which comprise much of Fondane's poetic and dramatic imagery – flight, mirror reflections, flashing neon signs. His own cinema here is silent as is the act of memory and reading, just as film is a restitution of the real to memory.

In July 1929, Fondane presented several films in Buenos Aires – Germaine Dulac's *La Coquille et le clergyman* (1928), Luis Bunuel's *Un Chien andalou* (1929) and Man Ray's *Etoile de mer* (1929). The talk he gave on that occasion, 'Présentation de films purs'¹⁸ reiterates his position on the origins of cinema – 'le premier art non noble' ('the first art which is not aristocratic')¹⁹ – states his visceral attitude – 'L'art aimerait agir sur vous comme un beau crime' ('Art would like to act upon you like a magnificent crime'); 'Une fonction qui répond à un besoin' ('A function which answers a need'); 'La pensée à l'état brut' ('Thought in its raw state')²⁰ – and insists on the primacy of the silent film as against sound – 'L'abaissement de l'art' ('The debasement of art').²¹

With the arrival of sound, market forces are now going to dominate the *expression of suppression* that the silent film allowed: 'Le cinéma nous a délivrés de tout un monde enfantin refoulé violemment en nous. . . . Le baiser sur la bouche clôt la première époque du film; une autre époque peut-être viendra avec le film parlant' ('Cinema has freed us of a whole infantile world violently repressed in us. . . . The final kiss ends the first era of film; perhaps another era will come with the talkies').²² He compares the active US cinema with the reactive expressive European one.²³

24 Ibid., p. 63.

25 Ibid., p. 64.

26 Ibid., p. 67. For accounts of Fondane's relationships to Dada and surrealism, see Henri Béhar and Michel Carassou, *Dada: Histoire d'une subversion* (Paris: Editions Fayard, 1990), pp. 64, 123, 164, 204; Henri Béhar and Michel Carassou, *Le Surréalisme* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992), pp. 12, 47–8, 92–3, 168–70, 493. A summary of Fondane's attitude to the surrealists is to be found in Fondane, *Rimbaud le voyou*, p. 237.

27 Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 65–6.

28 *Bifur*, edited by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, was published from 1929 to 1931, and had eight issues. Reprinted as *Bifur, 1929–31* two volumes (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1976). See particularly Benjamin Fondane, 'Du muet au parlant: grandeur et décadence du cinéma', *Bifur*, no. 5 (Paris, 1930), pp. 137–50. Republished in Marcel L'Herbier, *Intelligence du cinématographe* (Paris: Editions Corrêa, 1946), pp. 145–58, and in Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 71–85. Translated into English by Claudia Gorbman, 'From silent to talkie: the rise and fall of the cinema', in Richard Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907–1939*, Volume II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 45–54.

29 Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, p. 71.

30 Ibid., p. 74–5.

31 Ibid., p. 75.

32 Ibid., pp. 75–6.

Although he states that 'Dada est mort, le surréalisme se meurt' ('Dada is dead, surrealism is dying'),²⁴ he acknowledges that the surrealists have given birth to *l'esprit moderne* and have acted as *agents provocateurs* towards 'une recherche du réel' ('a search for the real').²⁵ However, his negative attitude towards surrealism is directed at automatic writing: 'La dictée automatique est une caricature de l'ambition d'écrire' ('Automatic dictation is a caricature of the writer's ambition').²⁶

He calls the films he is presenting intelligible in terms of their critical function – 'intelligible en tant que fonction critique' ('intelligible in terms of critical function') – and 'de nouveaux moyens de connaissance' ('new means of knowledge'). There is a link with Shestovian thought in that 'l'oeuvre prétend se mettre hors de la portée de la raison. . . . Le lock-out de la raison sauvegarde l'individu de ce qu'elle condamne' ('the work pretends to place itself outside the reach of reason. . . . The lock-out of reason safeguards the individual from what reason condemns').²⁷

Fondane wrote his most damning critique of the advent of sound and his most fervent promotion of the silent film in December 1929 for the review *Bifur*,²⁸ where he speaks of the arrival of sound as 'un terrible coup de poing . . . cette mort automatique' ('an awful punch . . . this automatic death').²⁹ The silent film replied to the needs of a society without myth and created a modern mythology, where a thousand publics became united (he cites the examples of Chaplin's films). Through silence there is unity, people are 'rapproché par un seul acte' ('brought together by a single act'), the act of silence. 'La dernière vérité à dire . . . : ces images sont muettes et le film est muet. . . . Il nous dispensait l'étoffe du monde moral, visuel et cosmogonique sous les espèces du silence' ('The latest truth to be said; these images are silent and the film is silent. . . . It gave us the very stuff of the moral, visual and cosmogonic world in the guise of silence').³⁰

Silence brings forth value, mystery and poetry: 'La matière . . . fortifiée de mystère' ('Matter strengthened by mystery'). Fondane reproaches subtitles for bringing us down to earth: 'Ils nous ramenaient du plan poétique sur la terre ferme, la plus aride' ('They brought us from the poetic plane to the harshest, driest ground').³¹ However, the abyss is not far:

Le voeu du film muet était . . . assez sensiblement de tendance catastrophique: supprimer toute parole, et toute logique qui étaye la parole et toute conception de l'homme qu'étaye la logique . . . Que le spectateur perdît pied, c'est tout ce que le cinéma voulait.

(The wish of the silent film was to a large extent catastrophic: to suppress all speech and all logic which underpins speech and all conception of man which logic underpins. . . . All that cinema wanted was for the audience to lose its balance.)³²

Silence is a lost means of communication, like Latin: 'Un moyen de communication disparaît . . . un nouveau latin se morcelle sous nos yeux' ('A form of communication is disappearing . . . a new Latin is splitting up before our eyes'). This act and art of silence will now be replaced by the industrial art of mechanical progress and mechanical aesthetics. Fondane does not believe that the sound film can be an answer to 'nos exigences lyriques, intellectuelles' ('our lyrical, intellectual demands'), as it is only 'un calque du faux réel' ('a copy of false reality'). Once again, he treats film as being: 'Je m'intéresse uniquement ici à la mort et à l'évolution d'une espèce' ('I'm only interested in the death and the evolution of a species').³³

The only hope for sound is as superimposition:

La parole, le bruit, devraient se résigner à tenir le rôle de la *surimpression* . . . *bruit ou paroles grossis, ou déformés, faux au possible* – voilà le seul emploi des moyens parlants ou sonores.

(Speech, sound should resign themselves to play the role of *superimposition* . . . *sound or speech which are exaggerated or distorted, as false as possible* – that's the only use of spoken or sound means.)³⁴

The sound track of Dimitri Kirsanoff's film *Rapt* (1934), adapted from C-F. Ramuz's novel, *La Séparation des races*, scripted by Fondane and considered as the first Swiss talkie, was in fact in this vein, with its mixture of muttered Swiss French and German, the garbled noises made by the village idiot, the reverse order playback of Honegger's and Hoérée's music.³⁵

In a letter to Artaud in 1930, Fondane continues his defence of the silent film, integrated into theatrical development: 'Ajoutons . . . l'influence sur la régie du film muet, dont les bénéfices sont à capter avant d'être entraînés à leur perdition par la victoire absolue du film parlant' ('Let's add the influence over direction of silent film, whose benefits are to be seized before being dragged down to their loss by the absolute victory of the talkie').³⁶

Fondane's imprecations against the sound film harden in two further articles he wrote in 1931 and 1933.³⁷ In 'Le cinéma dans l'impasse' sound is called 'la source du mal' ('the source of evil'). The silent film is seen as the answer to theatrical boredom and a protest against chatter, as positively childish and absurd, giving birth to a new language, the grammar of cinema, with editing as the syntax of this new language. Monotonous dialogue has suppressed all that: 'le cinéma était un langage et . . . traverse une crise qui l'a mené au bégaiement' ('cinema was a language and . . . it's going through a crisis which brought it to stammering').³⁸

The silent film was the art of movement, as against filmic stability in dialogue. The linguistic unity of silence is now destroyed by the

33 Ibid., pp. 79–81.

34 Ibid., p. 84.

35 Arthur Honegger wrote an article on the score in *La Revue musicale* (December 1934). By the time he made *Rapt*, Fondane had been working for Paramount for three years, and in interviews for *Aujourd'hui* (24 February 1934) and *L'Etoile belge* (21 July 1934) he mentioned that he had written more than one hundred scenarios. For his interviews on the shooting, see Benjamin Fondane, 'Quand Kirsanoff tournait la séparation des races', *Pour vous*, no. 268 (4 January 1934), republished in Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 110–13; Lucien Ray, 'Villages ennemis dans la montagne' (Entretien avec Fondane), *CinéMonde* (22 February 1934), pp. 150–51.

36 Published in Beray and Carassou (eds), *Le voyageur*, p. 62.

37 Benjamin Fondane, 'El cinema en el atolladero', *Sur*, no. 1 (Buenos Aires, 1931), pp. 158–65, published in French as 'Le cinéma dans l'impasse' in Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 87–92. Benjamin Fondane, 'Cinéma 33', *Les Cahiers jaunes*, no. 4 (1933), pp. 12–20. Republished in Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 93–106.

38 Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 87, 89–90.

- 39 In the summer of 1932, he writes negatively to Shestov about his work for Paramount: 'quel ahurissant appauvrissement depuis que je travaille sans relâche dans cette affreuse boîte', *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*, p. 56. Georges Neveux, interviewed by *France Culture* on 19 August 1982, recalled Fondane, one of three scriptwriters with himself and Alfred Savoir, 'désespéré par l'idiotie des studios'.
- 40 Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, p. 93.

production of multiple language copies dominated by the USA.³⁹ More bitterness and regret is expressed in 'Cinéma 33', which also takes on a more aggressive political tone: 'Nous vivons dans un monde renversé' ('We live in an upside down world').⁴⁰ The reality of the imagined sound of the silent film is defended, as well as its magic lyrical qualities:

Pour n'être que mental, le son manquait-il d'être réel? ... une nouvelle dimension, à croire qu'il relevait de la magie, des racines même du lyrisme. ... Le film muet nous avait donné le monde sous les espèces du silence. ... Et voilà que le *deus ex machina* met au monde le film parlant! Parlant? Non, bavard! ... De fait, dès qu'il devint bavard, le film devint national. National et parlant, rien ne peut plus le sauver ... le film muet permettait ... une frange de ciné-poème.

(Did sound lack reality in so far as it was only in the mind? ... A new dimension, which seems to come close to magic, to the very

PANTHÉON

ZOMBEON

RAPT

Réalisation de Dimitri KIRSANOFF

d'après le roman de C. F. RAMU

" LA SEPARATION DES RACES "

Adapté à l'écran par B. FONDANE

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⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 93–7

⁴² Ibid., p. 107

⁴³ Ibid., p. 105.

roots of lyricism. . . . The silent film has given us the world in the guise of silence and now the *deus ex machina* gives birth to the talking movies. Talking? No, chattering. . . . In fact as soon as it became a chatter box, the film became national. National and talking, nothing can save it now. The silent film allowed . . . a fringe of cinepoems.)⁴¹

Market forces are castigated, and the forecasts of 3D and colour criticized.⁴² Fondane sadly concludes that 'le film muet est mort pour toujours. . . . Où êtes-vous . . . Man Ray, René Clair, Luis Bunuel, soirées des Ursulines? . . . La chance du muet était une absence' ('The silent film is dead forever. . . . Where are you . . . Man Ray, René Clair, Luis Bunuel, Ursuline evenings? . . . The chance of the silent film was an absence'). Yet an optimistic note is also sounded: 'Mais si j'étais libre, vraiment libre, je tournerais un film absurde, sur une chose absurde, pour satisfaire à mon goût absurde de liberté' ('But if I was free, really free, I would make an absurd film, about something absurd, to satisfy my absurd taste for freedom').⁴³ We are reminded of what Fondane said of Rimbaud: 'Il lui faut naturellement plonger dans l'absurdité qui, seule, lui donne un sens, sans plus demander: pourquoi? . . . Quand la raison nous pousse au gouffre, c'est l'absurdité, chaque fois, qui nous sauve.' ('He naturally has to dive into absurdity, the only thing which gives him meaning



During the filming of *Rapt*, 1934: Kirsanoff, Ramuz and Fondane. Picture courtesy: Michel Carassou, Editions Paris-Méditerranée, 31 rue de la Ferronnerie, 75001 Paris.

⁴⁴ Fondane, *Rimbaud le voyou*, pp. 96, 207

⁴⁵ See the section on *Tararira* in Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma*, pp. 131–55

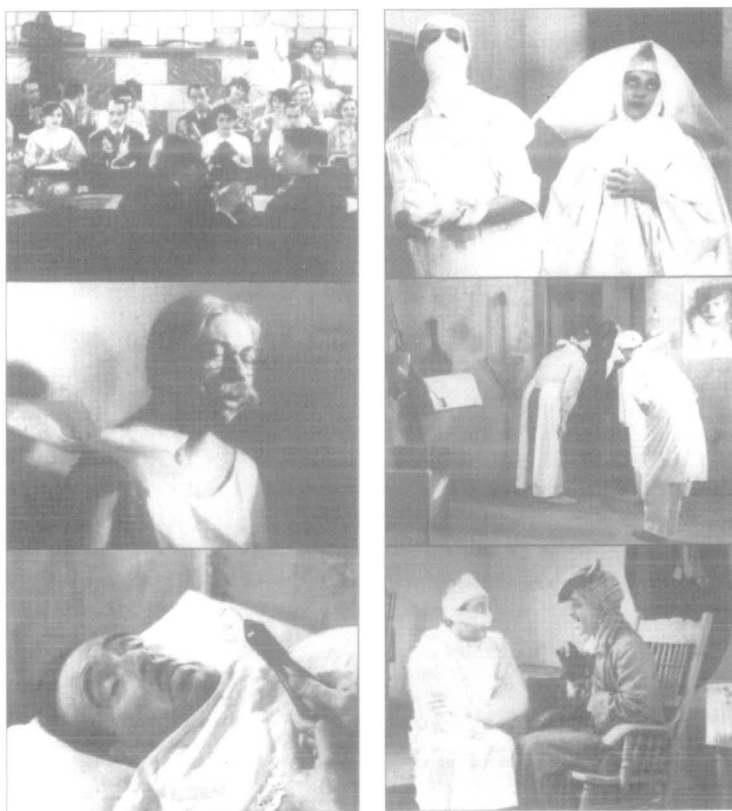
⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146

without asking: why? . . . When reason pushes us to the abyss, it is the absurd which saves us every time').⁴⁴

In Argentina from April to September 1936, Fondane did eventually, with great difficulty, make his absurd film: a musical comedy called *Tararira*, starring a lute quartet,⁴⁵ but it was not distributed, and copies have not yet been found. All that remains is correspondence with his wife and sister during the shooting, (which included playing Ravel's Bolero on kitchen utensils), and some still shots of the film. Fondane wrote 'Ce sera la caricature de la société d'aujourd'hui, un monde où l'art n'est plus' ('It will be the caricature of today's society, a world where art is no more');⁴⁶ 'Il fallait que je fasse un film dans ma vie' ('I have to make one film in my life').⁴⁷ In an interview in *L'Intransigeant* (29 January 1937), Fondane said, '*Tararira* est une comédie musicale. Je me suis efforcé d'y introduire l'esprit et la fantaisie de la "commedia dell'arte". Le sujet? L'aventure de quatre bohèmes, fous de musique, dans une ville ultra-moderne.' ('*Tararira* is a musical comedy. I tried to introduce the spirit and fantasy of the "commedia dell'arte". The subject? The

Scenes from *Tararira*. Picture courtesy: Michel Carassou, Editions Paris-Méditerranée, 31 rue de la Ferronnerie, 75001 Paris.



adventure of four bohemians, mad about music, in an ultra-modern city').

His long poem, *Titanic*, written in 1936, conjugates, however, the cinema viewer with misery and exile:

... Au cinéma, les hommes se tiennent coude à coude
... détachés, étrangers à leur propre vie
et je pense aux misères de toutes ces existences
massées dans cette cale avec un seul hublot
ouvert sur l'univers fictif –
figures rongées de sommeil et qui ont peur de vivre,
voyageurs, voyageurs assis sur une chaise

...

La vie déborde l'écran!
J'ai beau m'accrocher aux fauteuils,
la faim qui monte des entrailles
s'apaisera-t-elle jamais?

...

Mon voyage n'est pas fini ...

...

Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager ...

(... In the cinema men sit elbow to elbow
... detached, strangers to their own lives
and I think of the misery of all these existences
piled up in the hold of a ship with only one porthole
open onto the fictional universe –
faces worn out by sleep and fearful of life
travellers, travellers seated on a chair

...

Life spills over the screen!
I cling to the armchair in vain
will the hunger rising in my belly
ever be appeased?

...

My journey is not finished ...

...

The traveller has not finished travelling.)⁴⁸

Eight years later, the visas from Argentina that might have carried Fondane and his family out of occupied France never materialized. His last letter from the Drancy internment camp, the antechamber before deportation to the silence of Auschwitz, includes these words, with which I shall conclude:

Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager, ai-je écrit. ... C'est pour demain et c'est pour de bon. ... Le film d'horreur que j'ai vu ici. Mais pour ma part j'ai tout fait pour apaiser cette lamentable souffrance.

48 *Titanic*, in Fondane, *Le Mal des fantômes*, pp. 223, 247, 255.

49 Benjamin Fondane, 'Lettres de Drancy', first published by Michel Carassou in A. Magnan (ed.), *Expériences limites de l'épistolaire* (Paris: Editions Honoré Champion, 1993), pp. 297–307; republished in *Bulletin de la Société d'Etudes Benjamin Fondane*, no. 2 (Israel, 1994), pp. 4–8; translated into English by Chery! Weisberg, 'Benjamin Fondane: letters from Drancy', *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1 (New York, 1994), pp. 103–11.

(The traveller has not finished travelling. . . . It's for tomorrow and it's for good. . . . The horror film that I've seen here. But for my part I have done everything I could to appease this terrible suffering.)⁴⁹

The *Crash* debate: Anal wounds, metallic kisses

BARBARA CREED

Sheaths of metal, shards of glass, ripped leather upholstery, blood glistening on the steering wheel, two crash survivors copulating in a car, a man fucking a wound in the leg of a female crash victim, repeated episodes of anal sex, a car fetishist re-enacting the James Dean crash 'for real' – images such as these confront the viewer in David Cronenberg's film, *Crash* (1996). Yet, despite its perverse subject-matter, *Crash* is oddly and unexpectedly detached, sombre, even pensive. Herein lies the film's astonishing power. Cronenberg has created an enclosed world – like a bell jar – which is bleak, uncompromizing and intense, and which holds the viewer in thrall from beginning to end. The other unexpected feature of the film – given the media hype – is that its subject matter, while bordering on the pornographic, does not come across as shocking (although Westminster City Council saw fit to ban *Crash*, presumably disturbed by crutch-and-calliper sex).

Crash explores powerfully and with conviction the connection drawn between desire, sex and accidental death; that is death which represents in the words of one character 'a liberation', an almost 'impossible intensity', a sudden, out-of-control crash in which all systems suffer melt-down. Cronenberg asks us to consider the nature of desire in the postindustrial, postmodern age. Desire represents the opposite of the Romantic ideal of truth, beauty and wholeness; the postmodern desiring subject yearns for an experience marked by crash culture – division, simulation, brutality, obscenity, perversity, death.

Flesh melts into chrome, wounds open, technology links sex to cold smooth surfaces and metallic limbs. Yet the film's mood is not without levity. In the best surrealist tradition, events take on an absurd hue. It is clear that none of the characters, no matter how resourceful in their pursuit of the erotic, will ever find fulfilment.

Crash is not as shocking as other major films by Cronenberg (*Videodrome* [1983], *The Fly* [1986]) partly because its central theme – that the human psyche and body have been profoundly shaped by technology – is not new. In addition, the potentially radical nature of Cronenberg's representation of desire is undercut by an unadventurous approach to questions of sexual difference and sexual choice.

Since the heyday of the industrial revolution and the invention of increasingly powerful and marvellous machines, critics, theorists and avant-garde artists have explored the effects of technology on the human subject, for good or evil. Marinetti, founder of the Italian-based Futurist movement, argued in his Manifesto of 1909 for the virtues of technological progress, particularly its effects – change and speed – which he saw as cleansing and purifying. The surrealists were quick to explore the association between technology and desire. In his scandalous film, *Un Chien andalou* (1929), Luis Buñuel depicts a man becoming sexually aroused by the sight of a young woman run over by a speeding automobile. Nearly three decades earlier Emile Zola drew a similar connection between accidents and intense emotion. In *La Bête humaine* (1890) he wrote: 'She loved accidents: any mention of an animal run over, a man cut to pieces by a train, was bound to make her rush to the spot'.¹ From the beginning of the cinema to the present, filmmakers have revelled in the accident disaster epic (*Titanic* [1953, 1997], *Towering Inferno* [1974], *Airport* [1970]) and in the depiction of train collisions and car chases followed by the ubiquitous crash. As Virilio has said: 'Every time that a new technology has been invented, a new energy harnessed, a new product made, one also invents a new negativity, a new accident'.² Science-fiction films have explored the relationship between human and robot (*Metropolis*), human and cyborg (*Terminator* [1984, 1991]), flesh and metal (*Tetsuo* [1989]). Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) portrays Rachel, the femme fatale, as desirable precisely because she may be a replicant.

Based on the underground novel by J.G. Ballard, *Crash* draws on this rich heritage but in a radically different manner. In an extended, detailed exploration, *Crash* fuses and eroticizes two key motifs of modernity, technology and the wound. The term 'crash' itself is revealing; it not only describes the accident, it also signifies a new form of human behaviour which presumably originated with the accident, that is, an experience ('crashing a party', 'crashing for the night', 'crash diet') which is dramatic and fast and which links the

1 Emile Zola, *La Bête humaine* (1890), quoted in Mark Seltzer, 'Wound culture: trauma in the pathological public sphere', *October* 80 (Spring 1997), p. 3.

2 'Critical mass', Paul Virilio interviewed by Virginia Masden, *World Art*, no. 1 (1995), p. 81.

human experience to a parallel event in the mechanized, industrial world.

Unlike the images of modern advertising – to which *Crash* pays tribute – the car is ultimately rendered desirable not because of its sleek, perfect lines and gleaming metal, but because of its potential to fuse with human flesh. The concept of fusion is central to other Cronenberg films (*The Fly*, *Videodrome*, *Dead Ringers* [1988]) but it is in *Crash* that he most clearly eroticizes the union via the wound.

In his important article, 'Wound culture: trauma in the pathological public sphere', Mark Seltzer examines public fascination with car accidents, serial killing, and other forms of violence as a form of spectacle. He argues that public obsession with such events 'has come to make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound'.³ The key factor in the constitution of the pathological public sphere is eroticism. 'The wound and its strange attractions have become one way, that is, of locating the violence and the erotics, the erotic violence, at the crossing point of private fantasy and collective space: one way of locating what I have been calling the pathological public sphere.' The recent tidal wave of public interest in, and controversy over, the death of Princess Diana – in what is bound to become known as 'the celebrity crash of the century' – indicates how deeply embedded crash culture has become in contemporary consciousness.

The image of the 'bleeding wound' as a symbolic form is, of course, not new to the twentieth century. In a sense there has always been a pathological public sphere, but in the twentieth century it has been secularized and popularized through the mass media. In Christian religion, Christ's bleeding wounds have for centuries been the subject of prayer, iconography, narrative, painting and miracles. The wounds of St Sebastian have been fetishized in painting, and the marks of the stigmata are regarded as a sign of extreme holiness. In the early twentieth century Freud tied the significance of the bleeding wound to sexual difference; it signified the castrated female genital, the sight of which created fear in the male and supposedly led to the foundation of patriarchal culture.

In these discourses the 'wound' has been overdetermined – fetishized and eroticized. We find this process at work in the cinema, particularly in the horror genre but also in films such as *Bad Timing* (Nicolas Roeg, 1980) and *The Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, 1974). In the latter, which was greeted with public outrage, Dirk Bogarde, playing a member of the SS, kisses and caresses the open wound of a young Jewish girl (Charlotte Rampling) with whom he is obsessed. Cronenberg's fascination with wounds (*Rabid* [1977], *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*), both open and stitched, finds its most extreme statement in *Crash*, specifically in the sequences in which

³ Seltzer, 'Wound culture', p. 3.

the characters eroticize (touch, caress) the wounds of other accident survivors. *Crash* represents a convincing instance of Seltzer's argument.

The most confronting episode occurs when the character rather cheekily called James Ballard (James Spader) has to fuck a wound in Gabrielle's (Rosanna Arquette) shattered leg. In contrast to virtually all of the other sex scenes, this one does not involve anal penetration. When asked why the sex portrayed is 'usually rear-entry or anal' Cronenberg replied that it 'felt right, getting both the actors looking towards the camera and not at each other. It helped the sort of "disconnected" thing.'⁴ The sex scene between Ballard's wife Catherine (Deborah Unger) and the mysterious Vaughan (Elias Koteas) – the crash fetishist – is the only one in which sex involves vaginal entry and in which the woman is beaten. Compared to Catherine's well-groomed, world-weary husband, Vaughan is rough, brutal, animalistic. Vaughan sees the car accident as 'a fertilizing rather than destructive event – a liberation of sexual energy that mediates the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity impossible in any other form'.

From their first meeting it is clear that she is turned on to Vaughan ('his huge car must smell of semen') but is totally unprepared for the brutality of his sexual advances which take place in the back seat of his battered 1963 Lincoln (the car in which Kennedy was shot). Afterwards, she examines her badly bruised stomach, thighs and pubic area but – contrary to her expectations – she is not aroused by Vaughan's violence. Unlike the anal sex scenes (which almost always commence with the woman offering her breast to the man), and the episode of 'wound' sex, this one is not only 'disconnected', it is sadistic.

It is disturbing to note that in all of the sex scenes the woman offers herself to be penetrated: she bears the 'wound' that is fucked, and she is represented as the prosthetic other. The possibility of union between human and machine is displaced, in the main, on to woman's body. Cronenberg has stated that if the individual is enveloped by 'some harsh reality', he or she 'rather than be crushed, destroyed or diminished by it [should] embrace it fully'.⁵ *Crash* explores this proposition in two contexts: the violence of the car crash and its aftermath is examined primarily around James; the sexual threat of the brutal male and its 'harsh reality' is explored in relation to Catherine and her encounter with Vaughan. The sexism inherent in the latter episode is mirrored at other levels in the film.

Woman is also the conduit for male desire. In the final episodes two homosexual encounters take place: one between James and Vaughan which develops logically from previous events; the other between Helen (Holly Hunter) and the crippled Gabrielle which comes across as completely tokenistic. Nothing that has previously happened prepares us for this expression of lesbian desire; it occurs

4 'Crash', David Cronenberg interviewed by Chris Rodley, *Sight & Sound*, vol. 6, no. 6 (1996), p. 10.

5 Ibid.

gratuitously, and its enactment by the two women is coy and awkward. The scene of male eroticism, however, develops out of the growing relationship between James and Vaughan. The two men first meet in the hospital – after James' accident – when they pass in a corridor and Vaughan tenderly examines James' wounds. James, however, does not voice his erotic interest in Vaughan; this is 'spoken' by his wife in one of their anal encounters. This occurs after James has witnessed Vaughan's version of 'James Dean's Death by Porsche', and just after he rides with Vaughan and Helen in the Lincoln. Later Vaughan explains his theory of 'the reshaping of the human body by modern technology'. James is stimulated by Vaughan's passionate convictions, his need to embrace the car crash and his macho approach to the road.

During sex, Catherine arouses James by asking him questions about his own homoerotic desires: 'Can you imagine what his anus is like? ... Would you like to sodomize him? Would you like to put your penis right into his anus, thrust it up his anus? Tell me, describe it to me ... Describe how you'd reach over and unzip his greasy jeans ... Have you ever sucked a penis? ... Have you ever tasted semen?' As Catherine speaks, her back to James, he thrusts his penis into her; she takes Vaughan's place for James, becomes Vaughan's anus for him.

Woman's desires merge with those of the man/car – but this opposite is not true. There is no parallel scene in which man takes the place of woman for another woman. Nor is there a scene in which lesbian desire – or any form of female desire – is explored convincingly in relation to Vaughan's erotics of the wounded body. *Crash* thus speaks male, not female, desire; its visual style is brilliant, its subject matter is confrontational but its sexual politics are phallogentric. If, as Vaughan argues, the crash is a truly liberating, or fertilizing event, then ideally it should be liberating for both sexes.

debate:

Crimes of the future

MICHAEL GRANT

Crash has caused offence and scandal, provoking a response, at any rate in Britain, similar to that inaugurated by Robert Fulford in Toronto on the release of *Shivers* in 1975. However, Cronenberg's work has provoked opposition, not only from film critics of the right, but also from Robin Wood, a writer of very different persuasion, who has consistently found Cronenberg's films essentially life-denying: for him, they demonstrate a negativity which lacks even the potential for joy or redemptive renewal. To the extent that one finds in *Crash* a certain coldness and artifice of style, one may think these views at least partly justified. And yet, I would argue, the film is not open to appreciation of the kind many of the criticisms aimed at Cronenberg's work appear to take for granted. Unlike other films one may wish to compare to Cronenberg's – the zombie films of George Romero, for example – *Crash* is not easily grasped in terms of its message or theme, nor does it yield a clearly defined moral stance towards its protagonists or their actions. What is crucial to the film is the imaginative effort involved in apprehending it, an effort inseparable from what we are almost certain to experience as an inexorable movement towards failure and death. This is to say that there is indeed genuine contamination in the film, and it is a contamination of the established order of life by death, separation and fissure. However, the life of the film is that of the imagination, and if we are going to find revitalising potency anywhere in it we will find it there, in how we respond to the enactment the film offers

of the creative process itself. And to characterize that process, however briefly (even gnominically), I would say that with *Crash* Cronenberg has created a future from which he already speaks.

The point at issue here, which brings into relief the critical challenge posed by Cronenberg's art, may be clarified by reference to some remarks of Walter Benjamin's in his essay 'The storyteller'. Benjamin points out that in the Middle Ages (and in what remains today of traditional societies) there was no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not died. Death was integral to life, as mourning and celebration found expression in the great religious festivals and the passage of the seasons. However, in modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. Today we live in rooms which have never been touched by death, and when our deaths approach we are stowed away in hospitals or sanatoria, out of sight and out of mind. Nonetheless, it is 'characteristic that not only man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death'.¹ As someone's life comes to an end, the unforgettable emerges in his gestures and expressions; it imparts to 'everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him'.² Death, insists Benjamin, is the very source from which the traditional form of the story, the folk-tale, the chronicle, draws its authority. For the story-teller (from Chaucer to Rudyard Kipling) death is recognized and accepted as a natural part of life. Life can only be meaningful if we accept the fact that we die and the world goes on.

In this the traditional story or tale differs from the novel, which Benjamin assimilates to the Romantic tradition. The novel, he argues, is the only art form that includes time amongst its constitutive principles. There is a duality between the inwardness or subjectivity of the protagonist and the outside world which can only be overcome for the hero when he is in a position to comprehend the unity of his life, a unity encompassed in memory. Benjamin quotes from Georg Lukacs's *Theory of the Novel*: 'The insight which grasps this unity . . . becomes the divinatory-intuitive grasping of the unattained and therefore inexpressible meaning of life'.³ The novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is concerned to exorcize the terrors of death for both the writer and the reader. As Benjamin remarks: 'What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about'. This suggests that there is something of the religious still attaching to the practice of the novel. The novel came into the ascendant at a time when religious forms could no longer satisfy the Romantic ambition to find human experience itself an incarnation of the sacramental. Romantics like Blake and Shelley sought to achieve through the imagination an intimacy and spirituality powerful enough to challenge established religion on its own ground. In the novel we are encouraged to

1 Walter Benjamin, 'The storyteller', in *Illuminations*, trans. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), p. 94.
2 Ibid.

3 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 99.

identify with the hero, so that when the hero dies, either literally or figuratively (through marriage or passing into some other wholly new state), the presentation of his death impresses upon the reader the sense that what is being revealed is the true meaning of life. The hero of the novel is removed from the continuum of life and given an exceptional destiny, which condenses into itself a meaning and significance beyond the ordinary, a meaning and significance that are for the protagonist otherwise inexpressible. The same holds true of many Hollywood films: consider the last sequence of *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946). Here the deaths of the hero and heroine, who have fatally wounded each other in a final shoot-out, give meaning and purpose to their lives. Cradled in each other's arms and united by death in a kind of marriage, the final crane shot gathers them into a mystical union with the American wilderness.

But *Crash* is not organized in accordance with the principles of the novelistic continuum, despite the fact of its adaptation from a novel. The significance of the film lies elsewhere, in Cronenberg's understanding of the critical role played by modern art in relation to the forms of modern life. Stanley Cavell has argued that it is not merely the threat of fraudulence and the necessity for trust that has become characteristic of the modern, 'but equally reactions of disgust, embarrassment, impatience, partisanship, excitement without release, silence without serenity'.⁴ There is a dynamic of spiritual life present in Romantic art, but not the fulfilment, and this tradition of provocation and failure has been handed on to the moderns. Cavell's remarks on modern art give what might be called grammatical facts, facts that tell us what kind of object a modern work of art is, and what that work means for us. They find support from J.G. Ballard. In an interview concerned with Cronenberg's film of his novel *Crash*, Ballard argues that the emphasis on what he calls the 'sacramental aspect' of the car crash is far more pronounced in the film than it is in the book. The crashes are performed like profane versions of the mass.

Bertolucci, whom I know slightly, called the film 'a religious masterpiece' and I know what he meant. The compulsive rehearsal of the same scenario – these endless crashes being planned and executed – is in fact no more than the sort of repetitions you find in religious observance. The same mantras are recited, the same knees are bent before the same bleeding Christ up on his cross.⁵

Ballard finds in the car-wash sequence in *Crash* – which he considers one of the great scenes of cinema – the same quality of the ritualistic, in which the characters are made aware of some sort of transcendent experience taking place, lying outside their comprehension or grasp. It is in this sense that *Crash* may be described as critical: the evocation of religious iconography serves to make clear the failure of that evocation to connect with a living

4 Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 229.

5 'Dangerous driving', J.G. Ballard interviewed by Ralph Rugoff, *Frieze*, no. 34 (May 1997), p. 50.

tradition, or to speak with authority on behalf of the individual. An unbridgeable rupture opens between the individual's experience and the traditional forms that once served to make sense of that experience. And this is Cavell's point: poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has altered in such a way that the issues of sincerity and intention and seriousness are forced on the reader by the poem itself. This does not require the reader to respond in ways that are somehow fuller or more complex than those asked of us by earlier writing, but it does require a response that is more personal. Modern poetry 'promises us, not the re-assembly of community, but personal relationship unsponsored by that community; not the overcoming of our isolation, but the sharing of that isolation'. If modern art expresses a religious impulse, it does so insofar as it promises 'not to save the world out of love, but to save love for the world until it is responsive again'.⁶

6 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 229.

Cronenberg has discussed what he sees as part of the undertaking of *Crash* in terms that bear directly on Cavell's argument. In an interview, Cronenberg's attention is drawn by Chris Rodley to a line of dialogue in the script which has Vaughan saying of the car crash that it should be seen as 'fertilizing'. Cronenberg notes that the dialogue here comes directly from the novel, and compares Vaughan's position with an argument he has put forward in relation to *Shivers*: that the parasites in that film should be seen as a creative force, not a destructive one. The crucial issue for him in *Crash* concerns the 'tension between reality and that whole idea of an idealized life',⁷ and he argues that in the film idealization and fantasy are shown to precede reality and to give shape to it.

7 Chris Rodley (ed.), *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 201.

In *Crash* I'm saying that if some harsh reality envelops you, rather than be crushed, destroyed or diminished by it, embrace it fully. Develop it and take it even further than it wanted to go itself. See if that's not a creative endeavour. If that is not positive.⁸

8 Ibid., p. 202.

For its director, then, it is the film's transformative power that constitutes its imaginative life. And this is borne out by its cinematic realization. An austere dispassion of style combines formal control with socially excessive narrative action in ways that recall other of the later Cronenberg films, such as *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *M. Butterfly* (1993). The result is an art whose hieratic power frames the transmutation of presence into absence, of being into nothingness. Cronenberg's cinema may thus be placed in relation to one of the most significant traditions of modern poetry: for Mallarmé the poetic act is a transubstantiation of real presence into poetic absence, the real flower becoming transformed into the flower absent from all bouquets, and something similar may be said of Cronenberg's cinema, where events of the present are transformed into 'crimes of the future'. The ontological displacement of the symbolist poem (Eliot's 'Burnt Norton', for example) has as its counterpart in

9 Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. William McNeill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

10 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 311.

11 Donald Davie, *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1977), p. 103.

12 In an interview with David Breskin, cited by Peter Morris, *David Cronenberg: a Delicate Balance* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), p. 129.

Cronenberg's later cinema a displacement of temporality. In *Crash*, our contemporary obsessions with the sexuality of the machine and the erotic potentials of prosthesis are projected ahead of themselves, by means of a style that creates a time that is not yet ours, except in imagination. Style is therefore central to the film, and Vaughan, the renegade scientist, is the focus of Cronenberg's stylistic achievement: he is the avatar, not of time – the time of clocks, deadlines and appointments, of past, present and future – but of temporality, where what has been is what will have been for what is still in the process of becoming. It is here, in this *ecstasis* or running ahead, that for, Heidegger, *Dasein* is revealed in its authentic being as futural: 'in running ahead [*Dasein*] becomes visible as this one singular uniqueness of its singular fate in the possibility of its singular past'.⁹ The spectacles and crashes that Vaughan presides over present a temporality of this order, inducing in James and Catherine that anxiety or *angst* in which *Dasein* takes upon itself the proximity of the nothing. As their lives move with increasing intensity around him they come more deeply to understand what it would be to find their unique and singular fulfilment in what Heidegger has famously described as 'an impassioned freedom towards death'.¹⁰ It is this passion that Vaughan, with his freedom from illusion, a freedom he combines paradoxically with assurance and anxiety, embodies for them. Nonetheless it is part of the complexity of the film that they are able to acknowledge the fundamental contingency and essential mortality of their lives only after Vaughan's death, and this they do only inasmuch as they are able to acknowledge each other. Cronenberg describes his film as an existential love story, and in this he is undoubtedly correct: if James and Catherine achieve fulfilment it is because at the end of the film they are able to love each other, and yet it is a love consummated beside the highway and under the wreckage of Catherine's car – their bodies bearing the stigmata of death, of Vaughan's accomplished death and of their own anticipated deaths.

To argue in this vein is to say that *Crash* explores conditions of temporality far removed from those of the novel, at least as Walter Benjamin presents it. Nonetheless, I would at the same time insist that Cronenberg is a profoundly literary filmmaker. Modernist poetry has been described 'as something which so shapes time as to make us live its elapsing, its complex duration, with unusual attention to each present moment'.¹¹ In Cronenberg this sense of complex duration is not to be separated from his sense of mortality and the transformation of the body. The result in *Crash* is a narrative that explores the limits – the lack, we might say – of what engenders it. Cronenberg has spoken of his outlook as one of 'astringent romanticism', and of his characters as artists doomed to create and doomed equally to fail.¹² In them he addresses his own condition, that of the modern artist condemned to explore in ever-renewed

transformations of failure and death the inexorable conditions of art. Cronenberg has considered these matters elsewhere, of course, but in no other film has his integrity of vision been so completely sustained, or his cinematic mastery so absolutely realized.

debate:

Automatic lover

FRED BOTTING and SCOTT WILSON

Some dickless piece of shit fucked with my car
Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*

One of the most boring things one can say about a film is that it is boring. When a film's main preoccupation is sex, moreover, this sort of judgement is often simply an expression of moral distaste dressed up as sophistication. Yet *Crash* starts from the premiss, attributed to Michel Foucault, that 'sex is boring'. Boredom is the film's milieu: generically, *Crash* combines the stylized ennui of a seventies German urban alienation film with the grainy, low-tech, humourless repetition of a seventies German porn film.

Set in a Canada that seems to comprise totally of motorways and tower blocks, the film's opening sexual encounters present sex as a matter-of-fact, workaday activity: an automatic emptying of the liberation of sex into the free-floating realms of consumer capitalism, a 'pornographic culture' of materialized appearances, mechanical labour and copulation.¹ On a balcony overlooking jammed motorways, James and Catherine Ballard compare notes on the day's sexual encounters: 'how was work today darling?' is replaced by the equally perfunctory 'who did you fuck at work today, darling?', and shortly followed by the question, 'Did you come?' Sex becomes the same dull daily grind as work: a banal, repetitive, mundane event absorbed in the pleasure principle of the productive and consumptive economy. Sex, work and pleasure, but no *jouissance*, at least not that

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 34.

day, according to the Ballards' negative response to their own inquiries. An everyday routine, sex has been divested of desire, freed from any morality other than the imperative to enjoy, a joyless, superegoic command to keep on fucking.

Cronenberg's film addresses the injunction to and extinction of sexual desire, in line with J.G. Ballard's project in his novel *Crash* and other works. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, for example, Ballard has one character speak of the need 'to invent a series of imaginary sexual perversions just to keep the activity alive'.² For Vaughan, in *Crash*, the automobile serves as a sex aid. As the film's sex-guru, Vaughan recruits his disciples, the Ballards and Helen Remington, by setting their car accidents in a photo-narrative, thereby giving their physical trauma a new, erotic meaning. In a short time, the characters begin to share Vaughan's interest in car crashes, an interest manifested in precipitating, photographing, recording and re-enacting automobile collisions. In his workshop, he speaks of a 'benevolent psychopathology', of the car crash as a 'fertilizing event' and a 'liberation of sexual energy'. Vaughan is credited as the film's dominant character by the others around him, the master of ceremonies who connects crash victims, explains events and stages their ritual observances. As a paternal or phallic figure, however, he remains suspect. Elias Koteas's performance of Vaughan as the dangerously charismatic, virile American is so excessive (often recalling Jack Nicholson and Robert De Niro at their most deranged) as to successfully hint at the deficiency that determines his obsession. Far from being the intoxicating, sinister figure he appears to be for Helen Remington and the Ballards, he merely evokes incredulity, and fails to provide the point of identification that could enliven his project for a cinema audience. Looked at another way, he's simply 'a dickless piece of shit who fucks with cars', to quote Vincent Vega from Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*.

Absent or not, Vaughan's dick is an object of curiosity in the film. Ironically, in the one scene of normal, 'bedroom' sex between the Ballards, pleasure comes as an effect of persistent, probing inquiries into another fantasized sexual scene. Catherine Ballard interrogates her husband about Vaughan's penis: what does it look like; is it circumcised; is it badly scarred; would her husband like to suck it? Moving from his scars to his penis, from his sexual habits to the semen smell of his car, from his arsehole to the idea of sodomizing him, the escalating series of questions and speculations spices sex with a quite literal instance of perversion – in the Lacanian sense of a turning towards the father (*père version*) that foregrounds the symptom or object *a* supporting the paternal function.³ However, as Catherine Ballard later discovers, Vaughan's penis, if not already severed after 'the motorcycle accident' that was supposed to have damaged it, is not an organ he employs in the film.⁴ When he's not ramming someone with his car, he fucks with his fists, leaving

2 Cited in Sylvère Lotringer, *Overexposed* (London: Paladin, 1988), p. 5.

3 Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar of 21 January 1975', in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds), *Feminine Sexuality* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 162–71, 167.

4 David Cronenberg, *Crash* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 37.

behind a trail of cuts and bruises; as Catherine Ballard discovers, sex with Vaughan is just another kind of car crash.

Vaughan occupies a central place in the libidinal economies of the film's characters, then, as their point of *père version*, in the form of a quasi-phallic, yet penisless, figure who sits in his car as the scarred metaphor of a 'real' castration that precisely discloses the excessive *failure* of traditional symbolic castration. Liberated from any taboo that might once have given it meaning, all 'normal' sexual activity disappears and the phallus (the taboo) is desired precisely as a body that has been beaten black and blue, scarred with twisted metal. Imagined and fetishized as the signifier of the desire of an Other now seen as machine, the battered and broken body is the last remnant of a human erotic imaginary in the face of a fully automated form of desire. As the bedroom is replaced by the car, sexual organs and erogenous zones are replaced by scars in a technological supplementation of quasi-erotic energy and intensity; ultimately, cars, scars and signifiers conjoin to sever sex from bodies and organs.

Signifiers of the collision, the wounds and scars, are photographed collected, simulated and fetishized first by Vaughan, then his disciples: Catherine's interest in Vaughan's scarred body; Ballard's impatience to touch the healed gash along the back of Gabrielle's thigh; Ballard's ardent sensitivity towards his wife's battered and bruised body; Ballard's and Vaughan's passionate kissing of each other's bruised tattoos. Eventually the entire film is dominated by a generalized medico-pornographic gaze that is turned in on itself as a symptom of its own psychopathology. Scars endow bodies with a value they would not otherwise possess. As scar-screens, the empty units of visual identification ('characters' is too strong a word) are marked by the traces of an unspeakable automotive *jouissance* unavailable to a human culture determined by the restricted economy of the pleasure principle. At the point linking and separating horror and eroticism, crash scars announce a splitting of subjectivity that comes of the transformation of bodies and their reinscription in a new order of desiring. *Crash*, however, seems to do no more than fetishize a generalized lack. Without any privileged place of identification, the film is plotted along a chain of scars signifying the displacement of the fetish from its 'original' location as the substitute for maternal lack, to a fetishistic repetition and universalization of lack; all figures are all-too-obviously castrated: scarred, clumsy, limping bodies, mobile only with the aid of vehicles, sticks and calipers. The effect is similar to that noted by Laura Mulvey when she suggests that the fetishistic and close representation of the female image breaks the cinematic spell, freezing the male look, rather than allowing it to assume a masterful and superior distance.⁵ Similarly, in Slavoj Žižek's version of the pornographic gaze, the discomforting of the position of viewer as voyeur evacuates the attenuation of any

5 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), p. 18.

6 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1991), p. 108.

7 *Jouissance* includes Lacan's sense of the 'getting' of meaning ('enjoy-meant') and 'erotic bliss'. See Jacques Lacan, *Televisión*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1990), pp. 16, 89; and his account of the discharges of sexual and bodily energies exceeding symbolic law, that is, 'beyond the phallus', 'God and the jouissance of the [under erasure] woman', in Mitchell and Rose (eds), *Feminine Sexuality*, pp. 137–48; Bataille's general economic notion of excessive expenditure, sacrificial consumption and inner experience, see Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (eds), *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); and Lyotard's 'acinema' of the libidinal intensities of the drives and the wasteful and pyrotechnical dissipation of energy and images, see 'Acinema', in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 169–80.

secure authority.⁶ The wounds, bruises and scars repeatedly thrust by the camera into watching faces serve to abject, rather than incorporate or elevate, the look. Visual pleasure is not restored by the jubilant identification of meaning; the spectator is not returned to the comforts of a recognisable resolution which fills cinematic lack. Instead, all that is seen is a pornography of scars that either leaves one cold or becomes a horrible limit beyond which one cannot bear to look. It is from the overt presentation of a generalized castration, perhaps, that the censorious morality which surrounded the release of the film in Britain takes its bearings since any moral concern expressed in regard to the likelihood of cinematic seduction or childish emulation (this is not a film advocating sex in cars) is quite untenable.

If sex, in *Crash*, disappears in the back of a car, it does so as an effect of its generalized *automation*. Significantly, the car crashes do not take place as part of a compelling narrative. Stylistically and technically, *Crash* refuses to evoke or simulate the sensational and spectacular effects that one would expect of a film that draws an equivalence between sex and car crashes. There are no big bangs, no sensuous slow-motion smashes, no romantic chases or erotic duels on the open highway. The crashes take place as a series of bumps that occur as an effect of sudden accelerations or minor deviations amidst the packed lanes of commuter traffic. Since sex has become work, it has become just one functioning part of the regulative synchronous machine that articulates the circulations, exchanges and communication of so many bio-mechanical vehicles that are visualized in the film's recurrent shots of traffic flowing, a movement, relentless and aimless, that seems to be simply there, underscored by the omnipresent background noise of internal combustion engines. 'I somehow find myself driving again', Ballard remarks to Helen Remington. No sense or reason informs his decision, only a kind of automatism that is reinforced by the mutual, stupefied sense of the monotonous increase in heavy traffic. Cars replace human subjects, equivalent units of mechanical and automatic motion. In *Crash*, driving, work, sex and pleasure have become hyperhomogenized into the same productive-consumptive economy determining the flows of communicational vehicles. Sex, work and pleasure are bound up with driving and are absorbed by the repetitive, automatic insistence of a signifying chain. Everything accedes to a new order of automaton, a social symbolic machine working with and absorbing the intensities and erotic energy previously associated with enjoyment and *jouissance*.⁷

In the hypersexualized and desexualized setting of *Crash*, sex is associated with the circulation of communicational vehicles and invested with the erotic charge of the crash. That sex is still synonymous with some sort of 'crash', therefore, does denote its survival or reinvention as a mode of nonproductive expenditure

8 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1994), p. 204.

opposed to the world of work and traffic flows even as it is dependent upon them. Indeed, as Joan Copjec argues, sex appears where words and categories fail, in the gaps of signification where desire articulates and separates beings.⁸ But of course it is not the human characters who are the vehicles of sexual identity, nor are they the conduits of desire; they do not have the sex. Rather, they suffer the *effects* of autosex, they become its 'victims' and they eroticize themselves precisely as such in the form of their wounds and scars. Strangely, this is where *Crash* connects up with a so-called 'political correctness' problematic. This is not so much to do with the suggestion that in its sexy depiction of a paraplegic *Crash* shows a commendable willingness to affirm that the differently abled can also enjoy healthy relations on screen. Rather, the increasing juridical, governmental and corporate concern, in North America, with unauthorized incursions into the 'personal space' of employees (particularly the various degrees of sexual harassment) has, in common with *Crash*, the close identification of work and *jouissance*, and an interest in intensifying sex, and the social activities around it, as something that may seriously damage your health – or psyche. It is no longer taboo, or transgression, then, that returns some interest to sex, but the location of sex as the scene of potential disaster: sex as a kind of car crash, computer crash, financial crash or lifestyle crash, physical, psychic or system violation, malfunction, illness, break down or burn out, the catastrophic point where one's life, identity or career crashes.

Hollywood, of course, has a tradition of disaster films and of film careers arrested, destroyed or immortalized in one kind of crash or another, and they provide the conventional means by which the crash and its victim may be romanticized by the image: with its photographs and photographed reenactments of the celebrated deaths of James Dean and Jayne Mansfield, *Crash* makes explicit reference to this tradition. The photographic image becomes the only means by which the hypermodern subject can verify its existence imaginarily and symbolically in an umbilical connection to a reality 'that has been'.⁹ Absolutely bound up with a hyperhomogenizing system whose only point of fissure is the 'crash' itself, crashes become, for the hypermodern subject, simulations of the traumatic (missed) encounter with the real.¹⁰ Which is why they must be photographed. The photograph functions as a scar in time, freezing the moment when the mortal being becomes Other, fully transformed into pure image: Vaughan's photographs not only capture the instant when bodily parts are indelibly imprinted by mechanical components, they inscribe the image on another technological surface. As Hollywood has known for years, one's life and destiny are *realized* on film, and Vaughan is another prophet of this destiny, aspiring to die in a celebrated, and much photographed, crash. (In the novel, he plans to die in a crash which also kills Elizabeth Taylor.)

9 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 96.

10 For a discussion of the distinction between 'hypermodern' and 'postmodern', see the issue on 'Hypervalue', *Cultural Values*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1997).

In Cronenberg's film, however, Vaughan fails, in his own fatal crash, to guarantee his own photographic immortality by impacting with a film star. Nevertheless, after his death, the Ballards carry the torch with their own brand of car sex, presided over by the spectre of Vaughan, in a repetition and displacement of earlier patterns. Having bought and rendered roadworthy Vaughan's 1963 black Lincoln, the final sequence of the film documents their own romantically-paired car chase. With their scars and cars, sex between the two has become fully automated. Ballard is seen furiously driving Vaughan's car-phallus-scar machine, the object of pursuit being his wife's grey sportscar. He catches up to ram the smaller car repeatedly from behind, until it careers off the road. The Lincoln halts hurriedly. Ballard, apparently shaken, gets out and stumbles down the grassy roadside to the overturned car to peer down into the camera. As he kneels, his prostrate wife comes into shot. She is not dead. He inspects her injuries and strokes her head, breathes her name and asks if she is OK. In reply, she murmurs his name and says that she is OK. With a consolatory air, he tenderly kisses her and whispers 'maybe next time, darling . . . maybe next time'. They have sex where they are lying. The camera rises, with a warm crescendo of orchestral strings, above the lovers' ardent embrace on the grassy bank. A romantic climax and the end of the film.

The ending rewrites the story as the rediscovery of the illusion of a sexual relation. Vaughan's death governs the reborn sex life of the Ballards, renewing desire with the promise of an unimaginable *jouissance*. 'Maybe next time'. Maybe next time Catherine will attain fatal bliss in the orgasmic instant of the crash. Maybe next time: *jouissance* remains postponed, but the recovery of its possibility, its fantasy, constitutes the occasion for the reappearance of desire. From being a mechanical failure of diminishing returns, sex is transformed by the crash and becomes, again, a liberating experience. Maybe.

Where fantasy restores the illusion, deferral and the coming promise of a sexual relation in the film, there is no fantasy or place for it made available on the screen: the audience watch a relentless series of similar acts with steadily diminishing interest, divested of curiosity, desire or identification. The screen discloses itself to be an empty space of repetition: sex, sex, sex, car, crash, car, sex, sex in car, sex, crash, cars, sex in car, crash . . . and so on. Just as there is no sexual relation, so, in *Crash*, there is no cinematic relation, no fantastic unification between audience and moving images, scars having become too visible as vicious visual slashes severing voyeur and screen. Indeed, instead of the pleasurable cinematic spectacle of a narcissistic, urban alienation, *Crash* offers only the relation of non-relation, an experience of redundancy in the face of endless work-sex-pleasure that unfolds on film in the absence of a *jouissance*

that is always missed, that occurs elsewhere, in another scene, at another time, beyond human comprehension in the missed instantaneousness of the crash.

reports

Weimar and Third Reich Cinema: a Different Take, Goethe-Institut, London, with the collaboration of the University of Warwick and BFI Films, 1 November 1997

Thanks to its film programmer, Margaret Dériaz, the Goethe-Institut has built a considerable reputation for academic film events bringing together international contributors to challenge orthodoxies and generate new debates. What is so attractive about these occasions and makes me look forward to them is the eclectic mixture of people who have an interest in German film culture: filmgoers, filmmakers, archivists, teachers and academics mix easily and chat happily.

This particular event, jointly organized by Erica Carter and Margaret Dériaz, had generated so much interest that it was already fully booked a fortnight in advance and could have filled a hall twice the size of the Goethe-Institut's cinema. Conceived as an interdisciplinary conference it put into dynamic interaction the two most often discussed German cinema periods – Weimar and the Third Reich. Its aim was to refocus traditional film historical approaches by moving from Weimar as the golden age of art cinema, and Third Reich as entertainment/propaganda cinema to a consideration of the determinants on historical moments of audience reception. Where previously the cinematic breaks between the Weimar period and that of the Third Reich have been emphasized, this conference set out to problematize such an established periodisation. Concerned to stress continuities across these 'traditional' categories, to link stars and the studio system internally, and to make links between German cinema and Hollywood externally, the contributors shared a move away from an auteur/artist approach and towards a validation of popular cinema and its specific historical audiences.

Anton Kaes's opening paper 'Weimar Cinema and the Trauma of the Great War' countered Kracauer's thesis of Weimar Cinema as symptomatic of the rise of fascism and as a premonition of the World War II by arguing that it was rather the experience of World War I that was kept alive in the films of the Weimar period. For Kaes, Weimar Cinema specifically replays World War II experiences neither forgotten nor adequately remembered: the twin traumas of war and defeat were regularly and symbolically re-enacted in films such as *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari*, (Robert Wiene, 1919) *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1921), and *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926), although the war experience as such was not explicitly confronted until G.W. Pabst's film *Westfront 1918* (1930). Kaes turns to *Caligari* as exemplary for his thesis: Caesare the somnambulist mimics the shell-shocked soldiers; the narrative situation reproduces the common wartime event where one friend witnessed the death of the other; and the claustrophobic mise-en-scene restages the liminal experience of the trenches. Moreover, through its 'false' and 'true' doctor the film puts into play two antagonistic notions of psychiatry: war psychiatry, which identified malingerers rather than sufferers from the terrors of the mind, and a more humane 'Freudianism', interested in the talking cure.

Kaes's ingenious hermeneutic approach was a dazzling performance but it also raised a number of concerns. While the notion of Weimar films as repository of popular memory as trauma is intriguing, and his reading is historically specific and certainly illuminating, it is nevertheless also debatable to what extent his revisionism of Kracauer contributes to a new film history. This is particularly so given his emphasis on the same limited canon of art cinema that Kracauer covers and his employment of a similar founding principle: cinema as symptomatic of a national psyche. As a member of the audience pointed out, shell-

shock was an international experience, and therefore proposing any direct relation between shell-shock and Weimar Cinema specifically is immediately problematized.

By contrast, a screening of Gerhard Lamprecht's *Madame Bovary* (1937) exemplified how this popular UFA production did connect fairly unproblematically to the Weimar period: director, composer and the star, Pola Negri, had all made their reputation since 1918, and Negri had just returned from Hollywood to be repositioned as a Third Reich star. Interestingly, however, the film also raised the issue of how German the Nazi cinema was, given that although the director was German, the star was Polish and the novel French. These aspects confer a European dimension on the film, as Ginette Vincendeau pointed out. Most strikingly, there was near consensus that the film was a very boring middle-brow literary adaptation; an illustration, perhaps, that while popular film can be revealing about historical audiences, it may nevertheless have little to offer in terms of the aesthetic pleasures we expect from the canon. A further pleasure of an event like this is its encouragement of such heretical speculations.

The afternoon session, 'Stars, Genre, Spectators', brought into play different approaches to stars and their intertextuality. Erica Carter's paper, 'A different history: stars, gender and race in the Third Reich', was concerned with the ambivalence of a commercially viable star system under the Third Reich. Because film stars should be popular role models for a nationalist-socialist ideology, but would thus be competing with the real stars – the political leaders – and because the image of some top stars promoted ethnic otherness, the star system in Germany at this time was subject to quite specific pressures and tensions, often arising directly from the critical analyses of Dr Goebbels himself. Carter's case studies – on Zarah Leander, the highest paid star, and Ferdinand Marian, still best remembered for his role of

the Jew in the notorious *Jud Süß* (Veit Harlan, 1940) – identified some compelling ambiguities between the construction of stars and their ideological pay-off. Both stars are characterized by visual and aural excess, and positioned as ethnic other, but whereas Leander – as the Nazi cinema's answer to Garbo and exiled Weimar stars – ambiguously recalls the Weimar tradition of sexually active women and gender ambiguity, Marian's status as 'exotic' matinee idol was engendered through illegitimate (non-Aryan) racial identity. Thus the transgressive appeal of these two major Nazi stars (plus the fact that a number of the leading stars, including Leander, were foreigners) undermines any simplistic notions of Third Reich entertainment cinema as an effective tool for propaganda. As Richard Dyer commented, the star image in the Third Reich arguably constituted contested values, and can be seen as a site of resistance.

With rather different emphasis, Stephen Lowry's paper, 'Film stars and fascism: the case of Heinz Rühmann', argued that the apparently disruptive force of this social comedian as rebellious subject was contained by, and recuperated for, fascist integration; Rühmann playing the prototypical 'little man' was the massively popular and emblematic star of the Third Reich. Demonstrating how Rühmann's Nazi star status had relied more on his offscreen modern image (fast cars and private planes) than on the modest characters he played, Lowry argued that this double image allowed for identification with the 'little man, but a winner', and for a wishful projection of omnipotence. This double identification could then explain his lasting appeal to a *petit-bourgeois* German audience still marked by latent authoritarianism and denial of responsibility: Rühmann made a politically untainted comeback in the mid 1950s and in a career spanning over sixty years – from Weimar to a reunited Germany – became a household name for Germans of all generations. Lowry's paper identified how

ideology worked through a star who appealed to a specifically German sense of humour linked to popular traditions, and it was striking how many non-German film scholars confessed to never having heard of Rühmann and, now that they had, to not finding him funny!

As opposed to this interesting regionalism, it was the international appeal of the New Woman that Patrice Petro addressed in her paper 'Reconsidering Weimar's New Woman: from press to screen, Germany to Hollywood'. Repositioning the concerns of her earlier book *Joyless Streets* (1989), she challenged unproblematic appropriations of the New Woman as the proto-feminist ideal. Signifying sexual and social mobility in opposition to the forever-pregnant working-class woman, the New Woman's class and racial identity are crucial for commodifying this image as bourgeois and white. Louise Brooks and Marlene Dietrich are exemplary here for Petro, who went on to argue, however, that the extent to which their transgression is contained can be seen by turning to Josephine Baker, whose 'exotic' racial identity reveals the limits of the New Woman. Whereas Baker's cabaret performance in tuxedo evokes Dietrich's elegance, Dietrich's troubling 'Hot Voodoo' number in *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, US, 1932) alludes to Baker through animal and jungle references (a mise-en-scene associated with Baker's stage act). Petro's paper, which moved from Weimar to Hollywood, touched on a number of issues, but what stays with me is this moment of excess: Dietrich taking off the ape-mask – thereby collapsing animal into human, masculinity into female, and black into white. In my view this transgressive act expresses a deep-rooted anxiety around revealing and

disguising identity. It is a troubling moment of sophisticated exoticism which as much confirms a crisis of white bourgeois identity as it celebrates ambiguity and otherness, whilst nevertheless promoting and affirming racial stereotypes – of the nineteenth-century Black Venus and of the primitive modern. However, the most intriguing aspect of the concerns of the conference was the demonstration of a transatlantic two-way trade between Weimar Germany and Hollywood/USA in the construction of masquerade: one can only speculate whether Dietrich's transgressive 'Hot Voodoo' masquerade could have emerged from UFA instead of Hollywood.

The formal part of the conference concluded when Ginette Vincendeau and Richard Dyer joined the speakers in a Round Table discussion, 'German Cinema as Popular European Cinema?'. Vincendeau focused her pertinent summary by identifying and questioning aspects of what constituted the national, and Dyer was concerned to provoke discussion around the popular. Issues such as the crisis of categorization, the international dimension of the 1930s German film industry, exportability and importability of stars, the canon as popular texts, the relation of Hollywood to the popular national, and the intertwining of Nazi ideology with popular traditions opened up a Pandora's Box of film history – tantalizing for any interested scholar. By putting the debate into this wider framework, new links could be established but new productive questions and areas for New Histories were also engendered.

Ulrike Sieglöhr

Thanks to Jim Cook for his incisive comments.

reports

Tamil Cinema: History, Culture, Theory', Chennai, India, 15–19 August 1997

While the rest of the country was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence from British colonialism, the first ever international conference on Tamil cinema was inaugurated in Chennai (formerly known as Madras). This distance from national events is not unusual in Tamil Nadu where self assertion of Tamil culture has persistently interrogated the centrifugal forces of Indian nationalism. Nowhere else in India has cultural nationalism worked so successfully to dislodge upper caste hegemony, to carve out a non-Brahminical public sphere: from the early twentieth century, theatre, film, poetry and novels were effectively marshalled by political movements such as the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) and its breakaway successor, the political party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), to overcome a high-caste-dominated polity.

Organized by M.S.S. Panadian of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, the conference showcased both national and international scholarship on Tamil cinema. Scholarly papers were delivered in the morning while the post-lunch session was devoted to film screenings, followed by discussion. Papers were presented in Tamil or English, and for the benefit of those with no knowledge of Tamil, elegant translations were provided. Given the long history of crossover between politics and cinema in Tamil Nadu, this five-day conference dwelled extensively on the links between cinema and several adjacent cultural forms. In general, reading strategies cathected towards excavating caste and class markers, an aspect of film form that has rarely been studied in other cinemas; gender, however, was less privileged. Explicating these points of contact undoubtedly provides a fuller understanding

of context and history of films but, except for a couple of papers, the film object – the chosen subject of scrutiny and pleasure in Film Studies – was disregarded.

The conference commenced with a session on 'Origins of Tamil Cinema'. Theodore Bhaskaran extended some of his earlier insights in *The Message Bearers* (1981) to suggest that Marathi and Parsi theatre had a profound influence on early Tamil cinema. Even with the formation of film studies in the 1930s, he argued, theatre continued to exercise its influence over cinema in several ways: actors crossed over, songs were used in cinema because of their presumed popularity in theatre, and, most of all, the over-employment of frontal shots to deliver dialogue maintained the proscenium space of the theatre. This feature more than any others, according to Bhaskaran, fortified the link between theatre and film, a feature which at times may account for Tamil film's lack of formal innovation. Bhaskaran argued that Tamil cinema developed in relative isolation from other cinematic practices.

Some challenged Bhaskaran's claim of cultural isolationism for Tamil cinema, noting the influx of silent films from Europe and the USA in Madras theatres in the early twentieth century. Others objected to the over-privileging of the connections between Parsi theatre and Tamil cinema, arguing that local folk theatre also had an impact on film dialogue. Both interventions suggest that we may have to abandon the monocausal link between theatre and film, and locate instead the history of early cinema within a nexus of popular entertainment, consumption and colonialism.

Stephen Hughes's paper 'History of music in Tamil Nadu' tied the deployment of songs in Tamil cinema to the boom in the music recording industry in the late 1920s and 1930s. Weaving in rich details from newspaper advertisements, sales records, and reports on recording stars, Hughes argued that cinema could not ignore this burgeoning cash

cow, and that the convention of songs in Tamil cinema was firmly established by the late 1930s. K. Ravichandran suggested in his 'Music in Tamil cinema', however, that songs were not unanimously accepted as an innovation in Tamil cinema, but rather were seen as an 'unnatural' presence in cinema. Neither paper, however, examined how songs were incorporated into the soundtrack, and how their absence or presence affected the diegetic universe of films.

The first three papers stressed the links between cinema and adjacent cultural institutions, arguing at times that what we come to accept as 'film' is only provisionally distinct from these neighbouring media. This line of inquiry is clearly a corrective to the hermetic close analysis in film studies, but at the same time, none of these papers completely addressed the workings of cinematic technologies whose distinct histories may only be partially gleaned through adjoining sites of production.

Pritham Chakravarthy introduced the classic mythological film *Cinathamani* (1937) in the afternoon, confessing that she was particularly drawn to its representation of female desire. The film ran for over fifty weeks, its success often attributed to the heroine's popularity as a well-known recording artiste. The discussion that followed drew out this film's relationship to mythologicals produced in Calcutta, a link that was particularly developed by its Calcutta-based production crew. Discussion of the differences between the mythological and social genres, especially their impact on anti-colonial politics, was already simmering in the first afternoon and would continue the following day.

The theme for the second day's papers was 'Early Socials'. Stephen Hughes's 'Mythologicals vs socials' meticulously presented the critical reception of these genres. Film critics in the 1930s dismissed mythologicals as static and premodern, even if there was faint-hearted support from some quarters for its attempts at an unique form of

'Indian modernity'. Socials took over a wide range of reformist agenda – child marriage, caste inequalities and widow remarriage – but there were others that seemed less concerned with social reform and preferred a Robin Hood-like resolution to social inequalities. It is in the latter form, Hughes continued, we find a subgenre of 'stunt social', where car chases, aeroplanes and submarines dominate the mise-en-scene. Hughes ended by saying that the blooming of the modern social was fully realized in the films influenced by the Dravidian movement.

Hughes's research will undoubtedly benefit reception studies of other cinemas as well. The conceit of his paper, that there was a linear progression from mythologicals to socials, however, does not hold up when we turn to individual films. For instance, in the mythological *Cinathamani*, we find several elements of modern consumer culture that are supposedly antithetical to this genre. In other words, it appears that individual films do not fall so neatly into the categories demanded by film critics; however, it is precisely this lack of fit that has fuelled the engine of film studies. An earlier comment, that critics tended to pan mythologies because women and less-educated audiences found them appealing was furthered in Rajan Kurai's 'Interpreting the call for socials'. Examining the contradictory reception of the socials in film magazines of the 1930s, Rajan Kurai argued that while elites pushed for socials, their expectations of what such a genre would contain was unclear. Implicit in their response to mythologicals was a push to have 'natural' language in cinema instead of theatrical histrionics. He read this demand for 'natural' language as an upper-caste desire to universalize their dialect. Obviously the denaturalization of this upper-caste linguistic universe would be one of the first tasks of a critical Dravidian cinema.

The full import of both Hughes's and Rajan's papers was developed further after the screening of *Thyagabhoomi/The Land of*

Sacrifice (1939), introduced by Venkatesh Chakravarthy. It was banned and then re-released in 1952, when it had a very successful run. Notwithstanding the rave reviews of this film in upper-caste magazines like *Cinema Ulagam/World of Cinema*, it was suggested that the endorsement of socials should be seen as a particular brand of Brahminical realism. Not surprisingly, *Cinema Ulagam* remained silent on *Parasakti/The Goddess* (1952), the DMK's response to *Thyagabhoomi*. Each of these responses initiated an exploration of accepted histories and discursive conditions of film reviews and evaluations.

Madhav Prasad's paper, 'Presidency imagination and the socials', questioned the peculiar position of Madras as the predominant centre of film production for other South Indian films – Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada. In the absence of multilingual films, Prasad suggested that we should symptomatically read the circulation of female stars across linguistic borders as a way of engendering a unique mode of production. Male stars, in contrast, he argued, are usually tied to one language. The paper asks us to consider influences between different language films, whether genres are divided among the four languages, and how the economy of stars elides multilingual modes of production. The last point has some resonance when we remember the strike by film technicians that took place during the conference. The intra-union squabble ended with the formation of a separate Tamil union within the Madras film industry.

Papers on the third day were classified under 'Dravidian Movement and Cinema'. A.R. Venkatachalapathy's 'Cultural ambience of the Dravidian movement' attempted to sift through different responses to cinema within the Dravidian movement. The DK leader, E.V. Ramasami, or Periyar, was reluctant to see cinema as a mobilizing force, whereas the DMK leader C.N. Annadurai had no doubts about its potential to mobilize electoral

support. The latter's enthusiasm permitted party members to work as script and song writers in scores of Tamil films. Perhaps the most pointed responses to this paper were reminders, first, of Periyar's advice to women not to visit cinema halls, and second, of the DMK's less-than-radical representations of women in their films. Both comments altered the general impression that cinema was whole-heartedly accepted within the ranks of the DMK, and that a critique of ruling caste ideologies somehow extended to representations of women on screen.

A. Marx's paper on 'Dravidian movement and cinema' moved away from the more celebratory overtones of the conference which so far had accepted with little disagreement that DMK films were harbingers of progressive change. Marx argued that while the Dravidian movement did overthrow a hegemonic Brahminical world view, and replace it with a progressive anti-caste agenda, their films frequently replayed regressive stereotypes of untouchables or Dalits. All too often, Marx argued, in comedy scenes the Dalit is the butt of jokes. One response to Marx's dismissal of DMK films referred to *Nandanar* (1942) as a stunning critique of the caste system told from the point of view of Dalits. Gramian focused on contemporary efforts by the Hindu right wing to claim folk theatre as a vehicle to mobilize the masses in 'Drama and political mobilization by the DMK'. Explaining how Dravidian cinema and politics appropriated folk theatre to create an alternative public sphere, he noted that the Hindu right wing was adopting a similar strategy in their claims to chalk out an authentic Hindu regime. These issues were pursued further during the discussion following the screening of *Velaikari/Servant Maid* (1949), a classic DMK film with memorable dialogue.

Papers on the fourth day, under the rubric of 'Moral Censorship, Ideology of Uplift and Dissent', were closer to the concerns of scholars in film studies. K. Premanathan's

'Moral censorship, sexuality, and dissent in Tamil cinema' was delivered in a Deleuzian-inspired Tamil which even the expert translators found daunting. He argued that the masculine gaze in Tamil cinema submitted easily to the patriarchal impulses of Tamil social relations and thus prohibited articulations of alternative sexual desire on screen. Sundar Kali argued for the carnivalesque possibilities of comedy tracks in Tamil cinema. Focusing on the very popular comedy duo Senthil and Gowndamani, Kali demonstrated their ability to comment on a number of taboo subjects. Responses to this paper included a demand to see the comedians within a long tradition of comedy duos in Tamil cinema. Further, it was noted that their male bonding was triangulated through a female actress. It was also pointed out that the pair legitimized sexual obscenity and anti-Dalit humour in the public domain. This provocative paper could also have explored how the soundtrack cues us to comic scenes, the ways in which we are interpellated into laughter through point-of-view shots, and how the star economy of comedians negotiates with other stars.

Venkatesh Chakravarthy's 'Ideology of the uplift and problem of the avant garde' problematized the very peculiar location of the avant garde in Tamil cinema. He argued that since DMK films had already appropriated the agenda of the political avant garde in Tamil Nadu, the conventional disjunction between commercial popular film and art cinema was moot. Rather, what we call the avant garde are those films which seek to challenge dominant hegemonic narrative modes, such as *Paraskati* and, more recently, Bharathi Raja's *Enuyir Thozhan/My Dear Friend* (1990). Chakravarthy's provocative argument reclaimed the category of the avant garde for Tamil popular cinema which is overlooked in standard narratives of avant-garde films in India.

Moinak Biswas, Tejaswini Niranjana, Suresh Paul and Ravi Vasudevan reflected on

the proceedings on the last morning of the conference. Biswas pointed out that the political urgency of the caste question in cinematic representation marked discussions of Tamil cinema distinctly. He suggested that work on cult cinema might better inform discussions on cinephilia. Niranjana hoped for further research on the nexus between caste and gender, the force of regional modernities, and how migrant Tamil audiences reacted to this cinema. Paul reiterated that the question of female spectatorship was ignored by the presenters and proposed more focused workshops on singular topics such as film songs. Vasudevan suggested that a turn to some of the more discordant moments in cinema might help to understand how gender is addressed. He asked if the relationship between the democratic sphere and melodrama could be elaborated, and discussed also the continual reassertion of the male gaze in cinema.

At the close, participants hoped that there would be more such exchanges within Tamil Nadu, as well as conferences on regional cinemas in India. This tide of excitement and hope for serious discussion on cinema in India did not dilute one glaring omission – a substantial discussion of gender in Tamil cinema. While questions about representations of women on the Tamil screen were raised, a general recalcitrance occluded serious reflections of questions such as 'Did DMK film represent women differently?' or 'How is masculinity articulated in such films as *Ponmudi* (1994)?' Since these questions were raised only by women, there was a chauvinistic understanding that these issues were merely an appendage to the seminar. However, I want to suggest that when coupled with the question of representations of Dalits in Tamil cinema, the neglect can only be corrected with resource to close textual analyses of film, a methodological option which remained marginal at this conference.

Besides including sessions on gender and

sexual difference in prospective conferences, I suggest that the lack of research into the film industry needs to be urgently remedied. We simply cannot equip ourselves with critical tools to understand the dynamics among industry, film and audience if the workings of the industry remain opaque. Additionally, we have to acknowledge the role of television in Tamil Nadu, especially its investment in nostalgia through reruns of classic films.

The conference more than adequately addressed how Tamil cinema spectatorship begets Tamil citizenship and vice-versa, a dialectic that lies at the bedrock of a radical public sphere which is simultaneously anti-

caste and casteless. However, there was little said on the slide to populism that such a relationship may also obtain; there were no references or extensions of M.S.S. Pandian's pioneering work *The Image Trap* (1992), which explores the iconic status of M.G. Ramachandran as both film star and politician. All this is said in the hope that the cinephilia exhibited during screenings – with my colleagues singing along during the song sequences – is waiting to be mined for its utopian and critical possibilities.

Lalitha Gopalan

reviews

review:

Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (Film and Culture Series). New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 349 pp.

LAURA U. MARKS

Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies is a timely and intelligent examination of important lesbian and gay works, as well as other, more conventional films open to queer readings. More importantly, it is a sustained argument against the binary construction of gender, marshalling theoretical and filmic texts and the occasional rhetorical flourish to claim maleness for all.

One of the most salutary aspects of this book is that Straayer values independent films and videos as critical texts in their own right, and offers many examples of under-appreciated works. By looking at independent works by lesbians and gays, she shows that 'queers are *not* outside language but denied the podium' (p. 6). The most gender-transgressive works Straayer discusses are independent films and videos, with their greater freedom of experimentation and smaller audiences. At times, rather dry descriptions fail to capture the humour and subversiveness of independent works, but her discussion usefully introduces these works to a readership who may not be familiar with them. The role of the critic with works that are already critical and reflexive towards gender and sexuality is often more expository than analytical: it is enough to use them as intellectual levers on classical Hollywood and mainstream culture. For example, Straayer offers an interesting rereading of *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) in light of independent videos about mother-daughter relationships. To support her argument that the film positions Stella

as an unfit mother because of her working-class position, Straayer introduces Stella to Martha Rosler's *Born to be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby \$M* (1988). Rosler analyses how surrogate mother Mary Beth Whitehead, like Stella Dallas, was deemed unfit to keep the child she incubated for a wealthy couple.

Straayer's viewer-driven reading of mainstream and independent films reflects film scholarship's growing interest in audiences. Many of the works Straayer discusses circulate in marginal venues, such as lesbian and gay film festivals; in fact she could do even more to account for the social space of these venues and to describe the audiences that frequent them. However, her attention to a lesbian audience does allow her to concentrate on the details that queer viewers must exploit to obtain a pleasurable reading of a mainstream film. For example, in the 'temporary transvestite' genre of movies such as *Sylvia Scarlett* (George Cukor, 1935) and *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, 1983), the viewer may choose to believe the crossdressed character's inadequate disguise in order to extract erotic possibilities from the 'paradoxical bivalent kiss' (p. 54) between the temporary transvestite and her/his mistaken love interest. Here and elsewhere, Straayer demonstrates that a queer perspective opens space between film and viewer for multiple readings.

While mainstream movies and films of an earlier period typically incorporated transvestism into the narrative, a figure Straayer calls the 'She-man' is postmodern because he performs transvestism under the aegis of the music video. Interestingly, Straayer suggests that video is an especially suitable medium for the She-man's performance; traditionally a 'narcissistic' medium, video invites identification through McLuhanesque tactility, rather than the techniques of the Lacanian 'mirror image'. The She-man, typified by David Bowie and Divine (one might add Marilyn Manson and Dennis Rodman), is 'a fully functioning figure signifying both man and woman' (p. 94), who does not mock the feminine but draws on its power to increase his sexuality.

Music television has certainly given male performers a forum for exhibitionism, as Straayer argues. But the argument that it gives female performers agency is less convincing, in part because of the dated examples she cites. Are female performers in music video 'masquerading' femininity or offering it up in the conventional manner? More convincing is Straayer's suggestion that it is difficult to come up with a figure complementary to the She-man, because women would have to incorporate the active position usually accorded to male characters. The 'She-butchee', she argues, appropriates male prerogatives by breaking sexual taboos and aggressively exhibiting her untamed sexuality: her examples include Madonna, performance artist Karen Finley, female bodybuilders, and riot grrrl bands like L7. Perhaps more encouraging is the exemplary 'nonstraight heterosexual' Annie Sprinkle, a prostitute-turned-

performance-artist whom Straayer discusses with familiarity and fondness in chapter eight, 'The Seduction of Boundaries'. 'Reinscrib[ing] sodomy into heterosexuality' (p. 241), Sprinkle clearly enjoys her pedagogical role, including menstruation and other 'abject' aspects of female sexuality in her pornographic performances and having sex with men, women, transsexuals and herself.

Straayer points out that not only attraction but also repulsion is a form of identification. An intelligent discussion of sexually explicit films and videos begins with the argument that viewers of these works must be both empathetic and self-aware of their relationship to the work, that is, of their own perversions. As Robert Stoller, upon whom Straayer relies for this discussion, has argued, S/M 'scenes' appeal to particular psychic 'scripts' that the viewer may not share. Hence the visual appearance of an erotic scene is, in fact, its least revealing aspect. This interesting suggestion implies that the desires to which an explicit work such as M.M. Serra's and Maria Beatty's *A Lot of Fun for the Evil One* (1994) appeals, are somewhat protected from (the understanding of, though not the condemnation by) the prurient looks of outsiders. At the same time, a viewer who does not share the 'script' can empathetically witness the excitement or revulsion it stirs in others. I believe Straayer insists too strongly that one cannot be aroused by works that do not appeal to one's own psychic 'script': at queer film festivals these interactions often play out with surprising identificatory cross-overs.

S/M has become commonplace, even trendy, in contemporary western society, often among people seeking to temporarily reverse conventional power dynamics (hence the preponderance of white male professionals, straight and gay, who advertise as submissives). But when the sadomasochistic relationship mirrors a real social power relationship – as when, in Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* (1992), a middle-aged black museum attendant is ritually flogged by a young white man – the psychic consequences are worth exploring more fully than Straayer does. For example, is the experience cathartic, or confirming of the sexual power dynamics underlying racism; or does this vary according to the viewer?

Straayer observes five 'stages' in the appearance of lesbian pornography from the 1950s to the present: girl-girl scenes in heteroporn; cultural feminist films celebrating natural sexuality; lesbian sex scenes in narrative films; lesbian video porn; and explicit independent works screened at queer festivals. Straayer notes that 'to insist on an evolution in lesbian sexual activities is to reduce them entirely to fashion (which of course they *also* are)' (p. 203). Certainly, contemporary sexually explicit queer films and videos seem to set sexual trends: recently, for example, it seems *de rigueur* for erotic lesbian works to include a scene with a strap-on dildo. The list therefore has an implicit developmentalism, with which I agree in so far as the contemporary independent works seem to provide the

broadest range of possible identifications and object choices. The profusion of inventive lesbian works is a boon to heterosexual women as well as lesbians, but Straayer cautions that the heterosexual gaze is a repressive presence even in the relatively safe venue of home viewing or a queer film festival. Thus, she notes, lesbian porn is under pressure to police its own representations, given, for example, that the dildo seems inevitably to signify the penis. Her conclusion offers hope that sexual pleasure and identity can be redefined, as the penis itself is found to belong not always, and not only, to men.

Straayer finds opposition to gender fluidity not only in the patriarchal mainstream, but among feminists and among lesbians. Often, she notes, psychoanalytic feminist theories inadvertently reinforce sexism and heterosexism, rather than account for the broad range of gendered and sexual identities and pleasures. Feminist theory sometimes represses lesbian and gay experience, for example by appropriating real transvestite identity to 'transvestite' identification. Her discussion of the response to works with unapologetically masculine heroines leads Straayer to ask whether feminism itself relies upon maintaining sexual difference. For example, *Juggling Gender* (Tami Gold, 1992) documents the life of a woman who, simply by letting her beard grow, disturbs notions of essential gender among straights and constructed gender among lesbians.

In her 'Psychogenesis in the case of the baby butch,' Straayer argues that masculinity in a woman need not be pathological. 'So what if the girl *did* have penis envy? Why does this accusation function as a negative stereotype for lesbians? Do we *really* want to qualify as *real* women?' (pp. 136–7). Straayer claims the power of the phallic girl and her mature counterpart, which psychoanalysis ignores or pathologizes as 'castrating'. While Joan Riviere stated in 'Womanliness as a masquerade' (1929) that her patient wanted to 'castrate' men in order to claim phallic power for herself, Straayer argues, 'Only a conceptualization that posits men's power as being dependent on women's lower status can explain the retribution that men seek from ambitious, successful women' (p. 142).

Radically – and yet so sensibly that it does not come off as a radical move – Straayer argues that what the womanly masquerade produces distance *from* is not an essential woman, but a man. 'Most if not all women want to be men, which is *not* to say they want a penis (that is a sexual matter) but that they want to share men's position in the social realm (which is not simply a sexual matter)' (p. 146). She makes a cautious, and I find unnecessary, diversion into recent psychological research that shows infant girls feel genital pleasure and fear castration. This supports her argument that, in so far as Freud defined the penis as the source of infantile development and entry into the symbolic, girls have penises too. But when they

act as though they do, Straayer points out, women who pass as men – such as Jennifer Saunders in Britain, and Brandon Teena in the USA – meet with savage retribution (documented in Alisa Lebow's *Outlaw* [1994]).

Straayer's project to break down gender distinctions extends to an interesting examination of the representation of female ejaculation, another topic that independent films and videos explored before scholarly writing happened upon it. She historicizes the cultural ignorance surrounding female ejaculation, demonstrating that it has been repressed as part of contemporary western culture's campaign to construct two completely different sexes. Similarly, in a provocatively fragmentary postscript, Straayer further deconstructs the two-sex system by appealing to films about men who have lived as women, such as Richard Glatzer's *Glamazon* (1991) and Rosa von Praunheim's *I Am My Own Woman* (1992), as well as a new porn genre starring hormonal transsexuals who seem to have it all. Straayer's discussion, as I have noted, is by turns thoughtful and rhetorical, but by this point in the book the 'infinite continuum of sexes' (p. 259) for which she argues seems perfectly self-evident. Optimistically, Straayer suggests that we are entering a period in which women will reveal themselves to be men, and therapists will treat patients for dildo envy.

review:

Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: the Railroad and Silent Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 338 pp.

MARK GARRETT COOPER

Filmmakers love trains. From the Lumière Brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895) to Hale's *Tours* (1905–11) to the classic silent features *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), *Iron Horse* (John Ford, 1925), and *La Roue* (Abel Gance, 1923), cinema exploited the railroad as camera platform, setting, theme and symbol. How should we understand this preoccupation? Lynne Kirby argues that the railroad provided 'a social, perceptual, and ideological paradigm . . . that assisted in instituting the new medium and in constituting its public and its subjects' (p. 2). Her book synthesizes a wide range of scholarship on early cinema and on the social history of the railroad. It contributes an impressive amount of original research on train films, primarily from the USA, but also from the Soviet Union and France. And it gives scholarly concern with its topic a long lineage, beginning perhaps with Terry Ramsaye's remark that 'the movie shutter is related to the Pennsylvania Railroad's picket fence at Manhattan Transfer' (p. 47). By moving what had seemed a peripheral concern to the centre, *Parallel Tracks* offers an intriguing new vantage on the cinema's early development.

The first chapter establishes similarities between the railroad and cinema as technologies of perception. Wolfgang Shivelbush's *Railway Journey* inspires this comparison, and Kirby's prior work, along with that of Tom Gunning and Mary Ann Doane, has made his book an important one for scholars of early cinema.¹ In Kirby's

¹ Wolfgang Shivelbush, *Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Urban Books, 1979); Lynne Kirby, 'Male hysteria and early cinema', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), pp. 113–31; Tom Gunning, 'Heard over the phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde tradition of the terrors of technology', *Screen*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1991), pp. 184–96; Mary Ann Doane, 'Technology's body: cinematic vision in modernity', *differences*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1993), pp. 1–23.

- 2 Tom Gunning, 'The cinema of attractions', *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, nos 3–4 (1986), pp. 63–70; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1991).

account, the railway passenger and cinema spectator share three decisive features. First, railroad and cinema constitute or encourage 'a subject conditioned to desire the token possession of an inaccessible place and experience' (p. 41). Kirby calls this the 'touristic subject', although she clearly means to indicate the subject of commodification as well. Second, trains and movies institute a 'panoramic perception' in which 'the traveler sees the objects, landscapes, etc., through the apparatus which moves him/her through the world' (p. 45). This she equates with the 'despatialized subjectivity' described by Doane. Finally, the railway and the cinema each conduct a rationalization of space and time, also understood as the 'annihilation' of prior local times and spatial relationships. Sources of modern anxiety *par excellence*, mobility, despatialization and rationalization amount to a traumatic assault on the subject and potentially disrupt what it means to be a man or a woman. Following Gunning and Miriam Hansen, Kirby understands an early cinema of attractions to have reflected and cultivated this modern assault on the viewer's perception, while classical Hollywood cinema attempts to displace or contain it through narrative.² Train films represented the railroad as cinema's double, and were thus a privileged location in which the transformation from a cinema of attractions to classical cinema could be worked out. In early comic films, for instance, the train either runs over a male figure (*The Photographer's Mishap*, 1901) or threatens to do so (*Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*, 1902), and this threat is thematized as an assault on the man's vision. The result is a kind of male hysteria (in a popular rather than properly psychoanalytic sense), a reversal of the typical coding of the hysteric as a woman, and a crisis for the masculinity of the protagonists. Kirby thus sets up a threefold analogy among the train, masculinity and cinema: 'just as masculinity founders in the phenomenon of "male hysteria" . . . so pre-cinematic vision breaks apart in relation to film. But early cinematic perception and its aggressivity . . . would be put back on the track, so to speak, and gender given a more strongly narrative coding in early classical film.' (p. 72)

The second chapter charts this transformation. By the late nineteenth century, the railroad could be described both in conventionally gendered terms (trains are masculine) and as a site of social instability, a place where the circulation of passengers and movement through space presented dangers and fascinations that undermined existing social distinctions. This created a need to establish the safety and respectability of train travel on behalf of the bourgeois woman and in the interest of conventional gender arrangements. Filmmakers sought to do much the same thing, Kirby contends. We know that building a mass audience for US motion pictures depended on attracting 'respectable' patrons, often figured by the white, middle-class woman. The changing representation of trains

on film reveals how cinema might have accomplished this. In early films such as Edwin Porter's *Romance of the Rail* (commissioned by the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad in 1903), the train provides a setting for heterosexual romance, but burlesques the notion that trains are for lovers in its final shot, which shows a pair of male tramps emerging from under the train car in which the protagonists have wed. In such instances the train functions as what Kirby calls a 'joke space': 'a space of displacement, of the substitution of a repressed meaning for an acceptable one' (p. 93). A later group of films, running from D.W. Griffith's shorts that feature 'girl' telegraphers – for example, *The Lonedale Operator*, 1911) through the serial *The Hazards of Helen* (1914–17) – use the train less as setting than as a narrative agent, a character of sorts. They thereby set in place the conventions through which threats to traditional gender arrangements (active male, passive female) could be contained, but they also courted a female audience by representing active women. The active female figure loses currency in the train films of the 1920s. Nonetheless, the instabilities of the train as a joke space are contained rather than abolished, as Kirby demonstrates in a reading of Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926).

The final chapters give breadth to the railroad–cinema relationship by demonstrating its imbrication with two problematics that define the modern for many commentators: the city and the nation. In chapter three, 'the city' figures processes of urbanization, commodification and mechanization. King Vidor's *The Crowd* (MGM, 1928) is shown to stage the crises that mass society presents for a traditional (rural, Victorian, patriarchal) middle-class culture in order to resolve them by assimilating its new-middle-class protagonist all the more thoroughly into a superficial (because visually based) culture of consumption. The film establishes a thematic similarity between advertising and train travel (both provoke a state of hypnotic 'suggestibility') in order to indicate a feminization of the protagonist and to enable his recuperation by mass culture. Although it has very different politics, Dziga Vertov's Soviet classic, *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1928) uses images of the train to present a similar distinction. The masculine 'kino-eye and its aggressive train double' is distinguished from a feminine, though equally mechanical, 'editor-eye' that juxtaposes, mediates and is ultimately subsumed under the former' (p. 188). Chapter four also uses a comparative approach to discuss cinema's nationalism. Kirby need only invoke such Americanist classics as Henry Nash Smith's *The Virgin Land* to demonstrate the importance of the railroad to American nationalism.³ In addition, she shows that at a time when the automobile was rapidly replacing the train as the primary means of travel, John Ford's *Iron Horse* nostalgically replayed the building of the transcontinental railroad in order to represent national 'unification' as the reunion of a white man and woman, predicated

3 Henry Nash Smith, *The Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

upon the displacement of Native Americans. It thus helped to secure a vision of progress that presumed the enduring whiteness of the nation. The nationalism of Gance's *La Roue*, on the other hand, resides not in a thematization of the nation *per se*, but in the development of a French impressionist aesthetic and a refusal of the Hollywood love story's happy ending. The railway enables both operations by offering an iconography (the wheel, the train wreck) and a tragic working-class milieu.

These last chapters contain some of the book's most compelling readings, but they also make plain a weakness in its approach. In order to demonstrate the importance of images of the train, Kirby must continually relate both the railroad (outside film) and cinema to some third term: advertising and suggestibility in *The Crowd*, mechanization in *The Man with the Movie Camera*, racist nationalism in *Iron Horse*, aesthetics in *La Roue*. How important a model, then, can the train itself really have been? It is clear that cinema and the railroad can each be associated with a wide range of characteristically modern phenomena. And it is clear that films represent trains. But this does not necessarily mean that cinema developed in the way it did by taking the railroad as model. In fact, Kirby's own concern with how the train enables or thwarts stories of heterosexual romance suggests that the development of this kind of film story, rather than any one particular setting or theme, was the truly decisive factor. And considered as a perceptual technology, the hallmark of the new medium seems to have been that it provided a vantage that exceeded the view from the train, even as it appropriated it. Kirby's book amply accomplishes what its title announces: there are seemingly endless parallels to be found between discourse on cinema and discourse on the railroad (including cinema's own depictions). But the analogy itself cries out for an explanation it does not receive. Certainly the accounts of train travel on which Kirby most relies have been produced by postcinematic thinkers, which might offer another reason for the similarities between their account of modernity and that of cinema scholars. And her descriptions of the train as 'a visual phenomenon' often seem to imagine the train window as if it were always already analogous to a movie screen, which suggests that cinema may have redefined that point of view in its own terms. This leads one to wonder what the emergence of cinema as a mass medium meant for the railroad and the social and geopolitical arrangements it entailed. Although it does not explicitly consider this question, *Parallel Tracks* strongly suggests that cinema not only drew on, but also substantially altered, the cultural significance of the railroad. Kirby's wide-ranging, generously annotated study will be indispensable for anyone who wishes to pursue this topic further.

review:

Andrew Horton, *The Films of Theo Angelopoulos: a Cinema of Contemplation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 227pp.

Andrew Horton (ed.), *The Last Modernist: the Films of Theo Angelopoulos*. Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997, 138pp.

LYDIA PAPADIMITRIOU

Andrew Horton's two books on the work of Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos provide welcome additions to the very few studies on Greek cinema currently available in English. Angelopoulos is arguably the most renowned contemporary Greek director, his reputation recently boosted with the Grand Prix award that he received at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival for his film *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995).

Angelopoulos is an 'art cinema' director, whose films are intellectually demanding and addressed to an audience intent on exploring moral and existential questions through cinema, rather than seeking two hours of pure 'entertainment'. In other words, as Horton repeatedly points out in his two books, Angelopoulos's films work in direct opposition to Hollywood norms and conventional cinematic ethics.

As a Greek film director, Angelopoulos occupies a unique position in so far as his films have been successful in reaching an international audience. His work is firmly grounded within a Greek context. With the exception of *Ulysses' Gaze*, all of his films are set in Greece and deal with problems specifically related to Greek culture, history and society. However, by treating his topics in a way that, as Horton says, reveals a 'new humanism', he has managed to

make the nationally specific relevant beyond national borders (*Contemplation*, p. 196).

The question of transcending borders has become one of the recurring themes in his most recent work, culminating in *Ulysses' Gaze*. Following the journey of self-discovery undertaken by a Greek-American film director, *Ulysses' Gaze* is set throughout the Balkans – not only in Greece, but also in Bulgaria, Skopje (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Albania, Romania, Belgrade and, finally, Sarajevo.

Ulysses' Gaze contains a large number of Angelopoulos's established authorial features: allusions to ancient myth, commentary on recent history, slow narrative pace, long takes, highly composed images. And whilst departing from earlier films in telling a more explicitly transnational story, it deals with themes which have already been introduced in his previous work: the journey, the quest for home, the search for both a personal and a cultural identity.

In his monograph *The Films of Theo Angelopoulos* Andrew Horton offers the reader a comprehensive introduction to the author's work, as well as detailed readings of individual films. One of his first tasks is to present the reader with a list of twelve characteristics of Angelopoulos's work that he later develops in more detail by reference to specific films. The list conveys to the reader a general impression of the director's stylistic and thematic concerns. It is also a good indication of Horton's traditional methodology in his approach to authorship, as it relies extensively on the director's conscious intentions and illustrates their fulfilment with examples from the films. But whilst this approach can, and often does, lead to interesting insights, the absence of any logic in the juxtaposition of the points makes the reader feel rather frustrated and disoriented.

Stylistic and thematic aspects of Angelopoulos's work are juxtaposed indiscriminately; these are then illustrated with points which give an insight into the director's working methods. However, there is no attempt to uncover latent structural meanings within the text, or to explore its unconscious. Horton's approach is not neo-formalist either; in other words, he does not aim to decipher systematically the films' formal patterns. Rather, he provides us with a list of twelve characteristics which 'suggest points of entry that will be explored to various degrees throughout this text' (ibid., p. 6).

Horton begins his list by noting Angelopoulos's heightened concern with the image, his interest in carefully composed shots, and in very long takes. The formal beauty and slow narrative pace of Angelopoulos's films are two of their most striking features which Horton appropriately relates to their 'poetic' nature. However, by

attaching to them an almost metaphysical significance, Horton blurs – rather prematurely – description with interpretation.

His next two points stress Angelopoulos's concern with history and myth. It is surprising, at this point, that he distinguishes between these two concepts, particularly when they interrelate so intricately in Angelopoulos's films. But Horton's distinction is literal, referring to Angelopoulos's concern with twentieth-century Greek history on the one hand, and with ancient Greek myth on the other. Considering that he devotes the first two chapters of his book to contextualizing the historical and mythical references used by the director, Horton presents rather a sketchy analysis at this stage.

A far more general point then follows. Angelopoulos's films, Horton asserts, create a cinema of meditation (*ibid.*, p. 9). In order to be fully understood and experienced, they require active participation on the part of the audience, demanding time and contemplation. But this feature, typical of art cinema as a whole, seems rather awkwardly placed at this point in the list. This is particularly evident as it is followed by a detailed account of Angelopoulos's conception of character, which succinctly distinguishes his personal approach from the dominant model of narrative cinema.

A similar disparity characterizes other points which follow. Horton discusses Angelopoulos's working methods, particularly his use of location shooting in different parts of rural Greece, and relates this to the director's thematic concern for the 'past, present and possible future of the Greek village' (*ibid.*, p. 11). This rather specific observation is followed by the general one that Angelopoulos's cinema 'points to no simple truths, messages, or solutions', but 'suggests a desire to transcend' (*ibid.*, p. 12). Horton locates this in what he sees as an urge to overcome the 'tension between the form (and technology) of filmmaking and its cultural content'. He claims that the films express the desire to find, in the director's words, 'a new humanism, a new way' (*ibid.*, p. 12).

The last five characteristics that Horton notes are, again, far more specific. They concern Angelopoulos's interest in the Balkans 'as geographical, cultural and spiritual territories' (*ibid.*, p. 13); his 'play with notions of "reconstruction"' (*ibid.*, p. 14) – in other words the self-reflexivity of his work; the 'Faulknerian interconnections among themes, characters, locations that run throughout his works' (*ibid.*, p. 15); the concern with power and its violent abuse; and finally his attempt to offer utopian visions of a community 'where individuals can function without fear and repression' (*ibid.*, p. 16).

Rather than a template of a rigorous methodology, this rather awkwardly presented list becomes far more meaningful in what follows; here it functions more as notes to be fully developed in the rest of the book.

In the first part of his monograph Horton discusses systematically, and in satisfactory detail, the cultural and historical background to

the films, as well as the cinematic traditions from which they emerge; the wealth and range of cultural references used in Angelopoulos's films mean that a viewer unfamiliar with Greek culture, history, and myth can have access only to some of their levels of signification. Clearly, an understanding of such references can enrich the appreciation and enjoyment of the films.

The first chapter explores the wealth of Greek cultural heritage – ancient, Byzantine, modern – and its presence in the films, without recourse to nationalistic idealizations. The second chapter discusses the repressed Greek history of the twentieth century, and its reemergence through the films. This enables the reader to realize that in Angelopoulos's films, history is presented in a radical way, both in terms of its form (employing Brechtian techniques) and its content (which is politically subversive).

The third chapter covers more familiar ground for the film scholar, as it relates Angelopoulos to his cinematic kin. Wim Wenders, Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Michelangelo Antonioni, Miklos Jancso and Andrei Tarkovski are all presented as Angelopoulos's European counterparts in terms of either their style and/or thematic concerns. Links are demonstrated with Kenji Mizoguchi and Ozu Yasujiro, particularly in their use of silence and off-camera space; and US cinema, especially the work of Orson Welles, John Ford and – more surprisingly – the genre of the musical, is also shown to have influenced his vision.

The second part of the book consists of detailed readings of five of Angelopoulos's films: *Reconstruction* (1970), *The Traveling Players* (1975), *Voyage to Cythera* (1983), *Landscape in the Mist* (1988), and *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991). The discussion of all these films is based on a detailed summary of plot, and an indication of their main mythical and historical references. It is a positive aspect of these chapters that Horton's interpretations do not attempt to be exhaustive, but suggestive.

Whilst Horton's detailed synopses surely stem from the fact that most readers will not have seen the films, it is fair to say that they function more as invitations to see the films, or as memory triggers for those who have had the chance to see them, rather than satisfactory substitutions. The presentation of the structure and plot of *The Traveling Players* is, however, particularly interesting, as this follows the screenplay, thus giving the reader access to the working process through which Angelopoulos develops his films. (As a 'total auteur', Angelopoulos is responsible not only for the direction, but also for the ideas of his scripts, which he then develops with the collaboration of a group of writers – usually Tonino Guerra, Petros Markaris and Thanassis Valtinos.)

The last part of the book is dedicated to *Ulysses' Gaze*. The analysis follows the pattern established in the previous section, including a summary of the film, and a discussion of its references to

the myth of Ulysses, and to the troubled situation in the Balkans. The book then concludes with an interview with the director from 1993.

As an introduction to the films of Angelopoulos, Horton's book is informative, clear and suggestive. A significant part of the book is dedicated to uncovering the cultural references alluded to in the films, and understanding the formal choices made by the director. Angelopoulos's films function largely as enigmas which the viewer/interpreter tries to resolve. Horton does not so much offer solutions, but explores possibilities. While traditional in its approach to authorship, and frustrating in its limited theoretical insights, Horton's book nevertheless works very well as a 'companion' to the viewing of Angelopoulos's films, and as a foundation for further work.

Horton is evidently aware of the introductory nature of his monograph, as his second book, the edited collection entitled *The Last Modernist*, indicates. Including essays by scholars of such diverse origin and orientation as David Bordwell, Fredric Jameson, Dan Georgakas and Vassilis Rafailidis, this collection of essays explores in more detail and depth aspects of Angelopoulos's work left undeveloped in the former. The collection also shows how Angelopoulos's films can form part of broader discussions, particularly in relation to cinematic modernism.

From the seven contributors to the collection, it is only David Bordwell and Fredric Jameson who explicitly discuss the work of Angelopoulos as a modernist. The two essays are methodologically distinctive, reflecting the different schools of thought to which their authors belong. Bordwell's article focuses almost exclusively on the films' visual style, relating Angelopoulos to the work of such modernist filmmakers as Bertolucci, Godard, Fellini, Resnais, Pasolini, Rossellini and, predominantly, Antonioni. Jameson, on the other hand, offers a broader exploration of Angelopoulos's work in the context of modernism, analysing the films' overall style in relationship to their political significance.

Examining Angelopoulos's oeuvre as a whole, both Bordwell and Jameson accept the two-period division of his work that the director himself acknowledges. The earlier period consists of his 'epic', political films which focus on a group rather than an individual, and which impede the possibility of psychological identification. Films of this period include *Days of '36* (1972), *The Traveling Players*, *The Hunters* (1977) and *Alexander the Great* (1980). In contrast to this, Angelopoulos's later work marks a move towards the individual, invites greater emotional identification and explores existential questions. An indication of the shift in this period is the use of actors/stars, such as Manos Katrakis (*Voyage to Cythera*), Marcello

Mastroianni (*The Beekeeper* [1986]; *The Suspended Step of the Stork*), Stratos Tzortzoglou (*Landscape in the Mist*) and, finally, Harvey Keitel (*Ulysses' Gaze*) (*Modernist*, pp. 11–12, 109).

Bordwell argues that Angelopoulos is a modernist director because he 'explores and extends stylist options current in his milieu blending them towards specific goals. These goals – dedramatisation; a muted emotional expressivity; a subtle direction of the audience's attention; a concomitant awareness of the process of film viewing – form part of the modernist enterprise' (ibid., p. 12). Bordwell shows that Angelopoulos is not so much an 'original creator', but a 'synthesizer', and stresses that this does not disqualify his work from having value, since 'no work is sheerly original anyhow' (ibid., p. 13).

The main part of the essay provides a detailed examination of the patterns of visual composition in Angelopoulos's films – his use of space, camera movement and figure placement. Significantly, Bordwell shows how Angelopoulos has pursued and developed Antonioni's techniques of achieving dedramatization – pointing to the use of long-distance framing at emotionally charged moments, the elimination of non-diegetic music, and point-of-view cutting, the reduction of scenes to silences and *temps morts*, and by the use of impassive acting. Furthermore, Angelopoulos has used these techniques, Bordwell suggests, in the service of a radical political critique, following the tradition of political modernism most characteristically represented by the work of Godard (ibid., p. 14).

For Bordwell, the difference between Angelopoulos's early and late periods is evident in the extent to which modernist techniques are used for political goals. Whilst the earlier films are more politically committed, the later 'delineate individual, personal crises' (ibid., p. 24). But Bordwell considers the difference to be a matter of degree, for even the later films 'tackle concrete political issues of the moment: the death of Marxism, the desperate flow of European populations across borders, the possibility of national politics based on honor'. As he suggests in his conclusion, 'across Angelopoulos's career the weight of emphasis has shifted, but he has always combined political critique with a pessimistic tone' (ibid., p. 24).

Jameson begins his essay with a different definition of (late) modernism. He writes: 'The late modernist is one who manages to invent a new style after stylistic innovation has been pronounced exhausted' (ibid., p. 78). Jameson, as this quote suggests, does not consider Angelopoulos as a 'synthesizer'. Rather, he emphasizes the uniqueness of his style which succeeds in 'foregrounding that unrepresentable thing, the collective' (ibid., p. 86). Jameson emphasizes that 'Angelopoulos's early films have the distinction of inventing collective narratives and of projecting in new ways the collective destinies of a whole group of characters, who yield in their

turn the figure of the greater collectivity itself and its multiple sufferings in history' (ibid., p. 86).

By locating such power of innovation in Angelopoulos's earlier films, Jameson finds himself opposed to the later period which he considers to be formally regressive. He stresses that in these films, 'older formal and essentially bourgeois categories of individualistic narrative return to frame, and thus to displace and denature the attempt to retain an historical focus and commitment' (ibid., pp. 89–90).

But Jameson's article is not pessimistic in itself, for the author deciphers in *Ulysses' Gaze* a new beginning, 'a Novum not yet fully born, but which may well turn out to be a path not taken or an unfulfilled possibility, but about which it is our task as the diagnosticians of actuality to speculate' (ibid., p. 90). Jameson is not entirely clear as to whether he should call this new beginning modern or postmodern. But what is clear is that he sees some hope for the future through the film. For, he claims, it is a film that 'makes a contribution to inventing a new politics beyond the current "end of history"', and which affords 'unexpected glimpses of the narrative forms of the future' (ibid., p. 94).

Although Bordwell and Jameson approach the films in very different ways, they ultimately agree in considering them important instances of cinematic modernism. Rather than affirm, as the title of the collection implies, that with Angelopoulos modernism has reached its end, they both express belief and hope that it will continue and renew itself.

Written not only by academics, but also by film critics, and scriptwriters, the other five essays in the collection vary in scope. Most of the articles offer detailed analyses of particular films. The only exception is Michael Wilmington's essay which deals with Angelopoulos's career as a whole, offering an informative, but rather impressionist – and not very original – account of his style and themes. The article by Dan Georgakas focuses on *The Traveling Players* and examines the representation of history and politics in the film. The article offers a good insight into these issues, but it is a pity that it does not focus more exclusively on them, choosing instead to frame it by an overview of the director's work. Furthermore, whilst appropriately considering Angelopoulos's 'larger theme' to be 'Greek national identity' (ibid., p. 28), his analysis does not explicitly and systematically explore this issue.

Vassilis Rafailidis and Yvette Biro focus on *Voyage to Cythera*. Rafailidis offers a suggestive exploration of the mythical and literary meanings attached to the Greek island of Cythera, which, as he shows, represents a utopia of absolute happiness. He relates this theme to the historical and political dimensions of the film, and concludes on an optimistic note claiming that although the protagonist never reaches Cythera, the film does suggest that utopian

ideals still exist and should be looked for. It is unfortunate that Rafailidis's article, which makes a lot of references to 'a wealth of European culture' (ibid., p. 8), suffers from a lack of footnotes. This, however, seems to be a printing mistake rather than its author's fault, as the footnotes are signaled in the text but cannot be found anywhere in the book!

Approaching the same film from a different perspective, Biro explores the ways in which the film demonstrates an intersection of reality and imagination. By analysing in detail its formal structure, she develops a reading that emphasizes the universal and transcendental aspects of the journey depicted. Finally, in another essay, Gerald O'Grady presents us with a concise and systematic analysis of the central metaphor of *The Beekeeper*, namely that human life resembles a beehive, and that power relations are therefore inevitable.

As in his monograph, Horton's collection is also concluded by an interview with the director, conducted after the completion and critical success of *Ulysses' Gaze*. Once again, the interview reveals a director who is both very aware of his goals, and of the means of achieving them.

Like most collections of essays, *The Last Modernist* is uneven. Taken as an anthology of writings on Angelopoulos, the book can be said to achieve its aim to be representative of different approaches to his work (ibid., p. 7). However, this diversity is frustrating for a reader seeking to explore questions of cinematic modernism, which, after all, is what the title promises. Whilst Bordwell's and Jameson's articles complement each other well in their examination of this issue, all the other essays ignore or marginalize it. Furthermore, there is also a problem of repetition, which is especially evident if the articles are read together, and in conjunction with Horton's own monograph. This primarily occurs when, in order to establish a context for the discussion of the specific features of some of the films, writers repeatedly refer to general aspects of Angelopoulos's career and style. Read together, such generalizations become tiresome, and a desire for more detailed and specific analyses of films or issues emerges.

Finally – and this is the danger of writing on such suggestive and multi-layered films – there is the problem of too much interpretation. Whilst none of the contributors individually pushes his or her interpretation to an unacceptable extent, the cumulative effect of their writings opens up questions for the validity of such an exercise. Similar ideas and concepts seem to be repeated and recycled *ad infinitum*, whilst the referent – the film itself and its materiality – becomes lost behind all these words. It is for this reason that I consider David Bordwell's article to be the most interesting of the collection, for it is the only one that, in the words of Fredric Jameson, 'alongside the phenomenological accounts of this or that

filmic “world” and “world-view” of the work in question . . . far more empirically enumerate[s] the “techniques” and the technical innovations . . . which make an essay on film style a very different manner to the equivalent attempt to wrestle with the undecideabilities of literature or linguistic practices’ (ibid., p. 81).

review:

Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (eds), *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*. London: Routledge, 1997, 361pp.

CHRIS CAGLE

The 1950s may still be the 'Golden Age' for histories of US television, but in the American cultural imaginary, the 1960s serve as the nation's golden *televisual* age. One has only to look at recollective documentaries and nostalgia films for their myriad appropriations of televisual-historical moments (John F. Kennedy's inauguration and funeral, the trials of the space race, civil rights protests) as shorthand summations of a national collective seemingly united by the force of television. Or, further, to the way that television as an industry still understands its heritage; news documentary, public affairs programming and assassination coverage – those prestige forums most closely tied to the medium's claims for participation in the national public sphere – all find their precedents in a rather different classical era than that of live entertainment.

That said, Spigel's and Curtin's anthology on sixties television is about something else: fictional entertainment programming and, to a lesser extent, the cultural discourses shaping industry practice. Falling between the 'Vast Wasteland' era of the late 1950s and the turn to relevance in the early 1970s, this decade of entertainment has not fared well in much of the scholarship to date. If the highly ideological suburban sitcoms seemed in touch with a postwar mood of consensus, the historian of 1960s programming is faced with the sheer disparity between fiction and nonfiction; hence, J. Fred MacDonald's assessment that the series *Julia* was a 'comfortable image of black success . . . in stark opposition to the images seen on

1 J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: Afro-Americans in Television since 1948* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1983), p. 116. Bodroghkozy, 'Is this what you mean by color TV?', in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 144.

local and national newscasts'.¹ But, as Spigel's and Curtin's book title implies, the period may be interesting precisely because it does not reflect the times. If the revolution was not televised, the authors in this volume suggest, television was still the stage for a number of social conflicts – over gender, race, nation and region.

The result is remarkably coherent for an edited volume, and a collection of sound scholarship. One actually feels that the essays are trying to address a similar question – namely, how hegemonic trends in the industry were contested, or at least contestable. As the editors write in the introduction,

The concept of hegemony shows us how powerful institutions like media are involved in a perceptual struggle (never fully won, always ongoing) to incorporate social conflict and reach popular consensus. Such notions have moved media historians and critics away from the 'conspiratorial' view that mass media are simply opium for the masses. . . . Instead, the concept of hegemony emphasizes the social conflicts involved in cultural processes, and as such, serves as a mode of explaining the way television responded to and perpetuated these conflicts in the 1960s. (p. 9)

Even when the individual essays do not adopt the rubric of hegemony, they set about the recovery of social conflicts in and behind television programming. Sometimes, as with Steven Classen's essay on the conscription of television actors into the civil rights cause, or Roberta Pearson's essay on Native American protests about *Custer*, the conflict involves a historical counterpublic. At other times, representational struggles take place without mobilized political pressure. Julie D'Acci's essay, for instance, traces the emergence of US television's first female protagonist, Honey West, arguing that 'changing social discourses and practices, and other cultural products (even in tandem) would not have been enough to cause the networks to go out on the limb of featuring a single "new woman" protagonist in a prime-time dramatic program. The conditions of the TV industry at the time were absolutely fundamental to the eventual display of the "private eyeful" on the ever-cautious and wary home screen.' (p. 79)

A number of the essays take up the new frontier as a metaphor for television's domestic project. Lynn Spigel examines the discursive connection between the space race, 'white flight' and domesticity; she contends that space exploration was at heart a colonialist enterprise set not only on asserting symbolic sovereignty over space but also on keeping 'grounded "racially" marked Americans and women in general' (pp. 47–8). At times the essay's forced homologies and overworked metaphors beg a number of questions: might space have been used to market goods other than television sets?; might space race proponents have used metaphors not domestic? Still, Spigel does usefully suggest that the addition of

'space' to the domestic sitcom helped denaturalize its gender norms. Horace Newcomb's essay, 'From old frontier to new frontier', levels a powerful argument against the scholarly dismissals of the Western telefilm; notions that Westerns were especially Manichaean or evasive of social issues, he demonstrates, simply do not hold up to closer analysis.

A few of the contributions focus on the present-day retrospection of the decade. Thomas Streeter examines the emergence of a 'cable television discourse' with the current utopian claims of the Internet in mind, while Lynn Spigel's essay draws connections between cyberspace and the space race discourse. Meanwhile, Herman Gray looks at recent recycling of the civil rights era in television, arguing that we need to look at what these histories mean in the present. We should not, he maintains, 'treat all representations and interventions – progressive (*Eyes on the Prize*), reactionary (*Mississippi Burning*), nostalgic (*I'll Fly Away*) – as simple equivalents. Politically and culturally, they are not.' (p. 357) Such a stance still has problems – most of all in its implication that the texts' politics are immediately readable, or their retro-documentary form completely innocent – yet it does usefully shift the debates around postmodern historicity in television memory. Despite its elliptical assertions, Gray's essay remains one of the more original in the volume.

The essays in the third section of the book, 'Nation and Citizenship', all take up Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as imagined communities. Michael Curtin's contribution uses Anderson to examine the US government's policy formation towards extending television around the globe. Like Anderson's example of Russification, he argues, US advocacy of 'global television' strove foremost to quell smaller nationalisms (here, Third World 'unrest') under its *Pax Americana*. Victoria Johnson gives a more micro reading of the star image of Lawrence Welk, whom the essay aligns with the 'Midwest' (and the provincial 'fly-over' zone, more generally) and, later, with the 'silent majority'. Johnson concludes that Welk's image was dynamic, rooted in a changing industry and responding to a shifting demographic; a diachronic analysis therefore becomes a necessity in understanding the bandleader.

Despite nods to Anderson's imagined communities and globality, though, the volume remains resolutely American in focus and even perspective. How relevant the scholarship will be to other national contexts I cannot say, but its applicability will be hampered not only by the individual texts (though such shows as *Honey West* and *Custer* are not much more familiar to US nationals who, like myself, were born after 1970) but also by the book's silence on televisual social realism, public sector broadcasting, or television–film coproduction – all issues faced by various European and Anglophone non- or quasi-commercial broadcasting systems. *Revolution's* willingness to take commercial programming seriously is laudable,

but, like the concept of 'flow', its methodologies may best be suited to a nationally specific commercial system.

Insufficient attention to methodology, in fact, is the cause of the anthology's biggest limitation. Spigel's and Curtin's introduction does a formidable job in relating the disparate essays, and, for an edited anthology, divergent methodologies are not in themselves a problem. As they themselves admit, 'While almost everybody seems to assume that television affects and reflects social change, it is clear that we really don't know how to explain the relationship among media texts and social contexts in ways that are very convincing. . . . This book does not provide an answer for this ultimately philosophical question, but it does provide some tools for thinking through some of these problems in relation to the case at hand.' (p.10) Perhaps the purpose of a historical anthology is not to resolve abstruse theoretical debates, but the contributors *are* following a methodology, one that remains remarkably similar across the essays. Furthermore, a number of the essays distance themselves from previous generations of scholarship, whether this is a narrow textual reading, stemming from the 'images of' television criticism, or from the canonical television histories like Erik Barnouw's *Tube of Plenty*.² In other words, the contributions diverge from the industrial histories preceding them, but throughout the volume industrial analysis takes on an importance lacking in a book such as, say, *Channels of Discourse*, or even *Regarding Television*.³ However implicit, this critical stance is coherent and worthy of reflection.

Meanwhile, interesting theoretical points are given almost as throwaways, or quickly dismissed. For example, the editors want to position the book as negotiating the 'structure'/'culture' divide in media studies, but never suggest how that might be done. '[A]s much of the work in Cultural Studies has taught us, culture and structure need to be seen in more holistic ways'. But has Cultural Studies made that claim? Perhaps it has, but only after the vocal critiques launched by the political economists of the media. For the anthology's methodological eclecticism, too, they cite the 'neo-Marxism' of Cultural Studies, but never explain how neo-Marxism (or Cultural Studies, for that matter) entails a bricolage of approaches.

These methodological issues hardly constitute a fatal flaw for the book. They may, as the editors hope, generate possibilities for further study. *The Revolution Wasn't Televised* remains a smart and invaluable contribution to the growing scholarly interest in 1960s entertainment television and to the fields of television, media, and cultural studies in general.

2 Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: the Evolution of American Television* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

3 Robert C. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – an Anthology* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983).